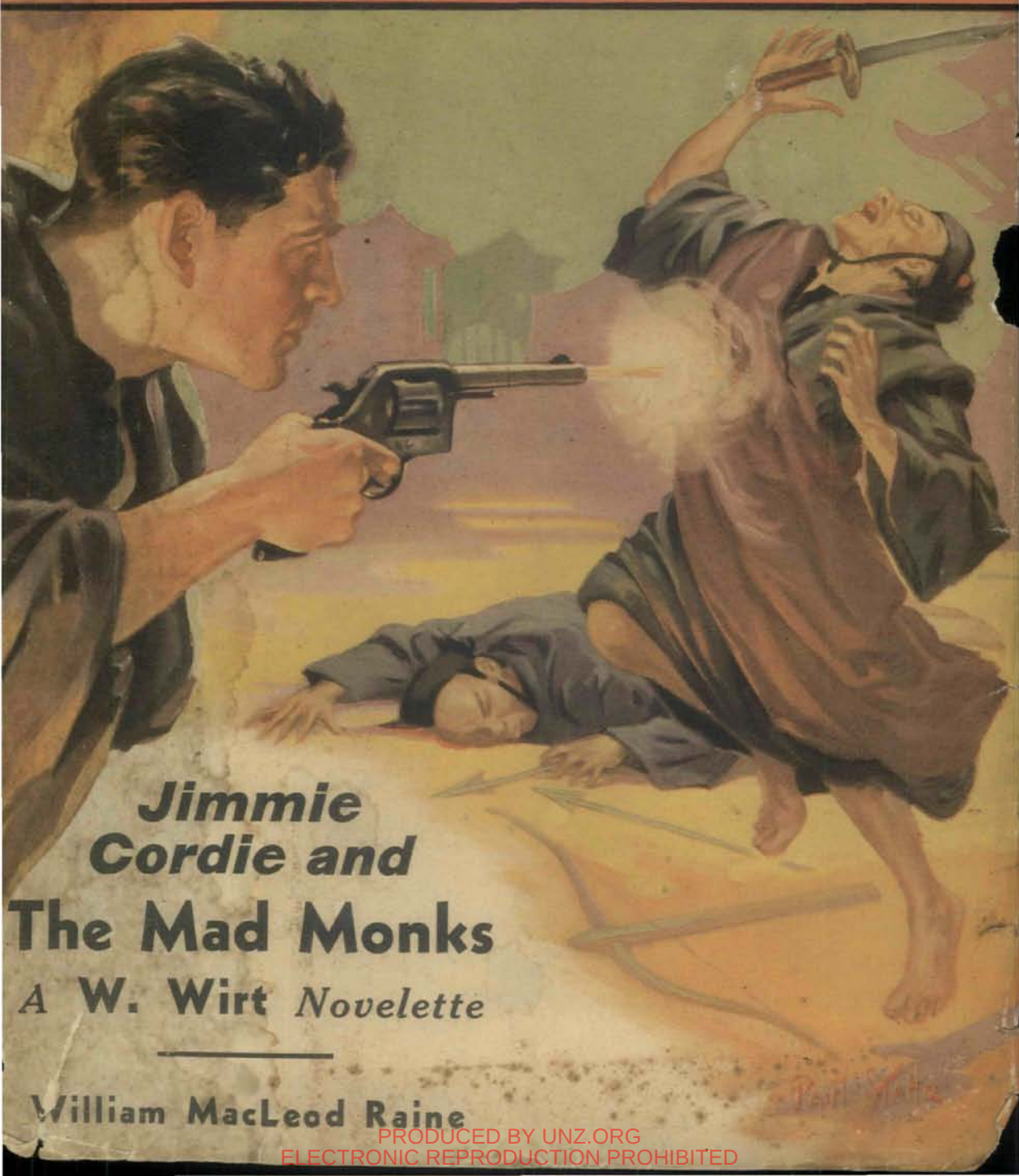
10¢

J. Allan Dunn—Theodore Roscoe

ARGOSY

NRA

JULY 7 WEEKLY



Jimmie Cordie and The Mad Monks

A W. Wirt *Novelette*

William MacLeod Raine

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A MAN AND HIS *Dandruff* ARE SOON PARTED

. . . IF HE USES *Listerine*

Listerine treatment often gets brilliant results within 7 days
Removes scales and crust—cleanses and invigorates the scalp

If your head feels hot and itchy, if your hair is beginning to fall, if you show the slightest evidence of loose dandruff, get to work with Listerine at once. You will be delighted to find how quickly it attacks this irritating and humiliating condition. Thousands have used it successfully.

Most men experiment around with complicated and expensive so-called cures before finding, in the end, that Listerine would have done the job for them at little cost and in a short time.

The treatment is ridiculously simple. Just douse Listerine on the head and massage thoroughly with the finger tips either before or after the soap and water shampoo. Often one treatment will get results. Even stubborn cases frequently yield in seven days. If the scalp is dry, use a little olive or castor oil in conjunction with the Listerine. Lambert Pharmacal Company, St. Louis, Missouri.

NRA

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And we defy anyone to excel our quality. Every standard brand tire reconstructed by our superior, modern method is positively guaranteed to give full 12 months' service under severest road conditions. This guarantee is backed by the entire financial resources of an old reliable company. Order Now at Today's Lowest Prices.

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Size Rim	Tires	Tubes
29x4.40-21	$2.15	$0.85
29x4.50-20	2.25	.85
30x4.50-21	2.40	.85
28x4.75-19	2.45	.95
29x4.75-20	2.50	.95
29x5.00-19	2.95	1.05
30x5.00-20	2.95	1.05
28x5.25-18	2.00	1.15
29x5.25-19	2.95	1.15
30x5.25-20	2.95	1.15
31x5.25-21	3.25	1.15
28x5.50-18	3.25	1.15
29x5.50-19	3.33	1.15
30x6.00-19	3.50	1.15
31x6.00-19	3.40	1.15
32x6.00-20	3.45	1.25
33x6.00-21	3.69	1.25
32x6.50-20	3.75	1.35

Reg. CORD TIRES

Size	Tires	Tubes
30x3½	2.20	.75
31x4	2.95	1.05
32x4	3.05	.85
32x4	3.05	.85
34x4	3.25	.85
32x4½	3.35	1.15
33x4½	3.45	1.15
34x4½	3.45	1.15
30x5	3.95	1.35
33x5	3.75	1.45
35x5	3.95	1.50

TRUCK TIRES

Size	Tires	Tubes
32x6	$7.95	$2.75
34x7	10.95	3.95
36x6	9.95	3.95
36x8	12.45	4.25
40x8	15.95	4.95

TRUCK BALLOONS

Size	Tires	Tubes
6.00-20	$3.75	$1.65
7.00-20	5.95	2.95
7.50-20	6.95	3.75
8.25-20	11.45	4.95

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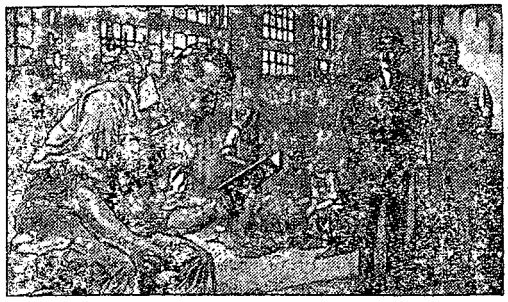

"Ed Wilson, there, is one of the most ambitious men in the plant. I notice that he never fools away his spare time. He studies his International Correspondence Schools course every chance he gets.

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ARGOSY

Action Stories of Every Variety

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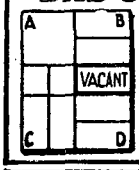

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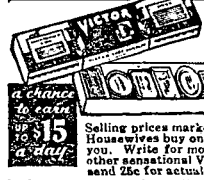

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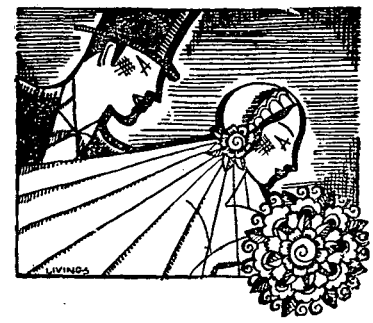

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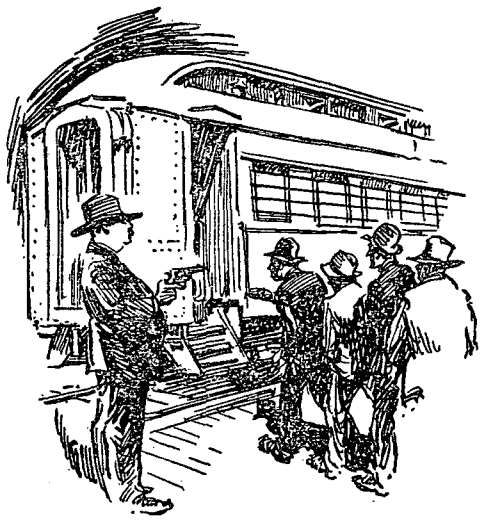
Easy Money



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50% TO 60% MORE SERVICE

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29x4.40-21	$2.15	$0.85
29x4.50-20	2.35	0.85
30x4.50-21	2.40	0.85
28x4.75-19	2.45	0.95
29x4.75-20	2.50	0.95
29x5.00-19	2.85	1.05
30x5.00-20	2.85	1.05
28x5.25-18	2.90	1.15
29x5.25-19	2.95	1.15
30x5.25-20	2.95	1.15
31x5.25-21	3.25	1.15
28x5.50-18	3.35	1.15
29x5.50-19	3.35	1.15
30x6.00-18	3.40	1.15
31x6.00-19	3.40	1.15
32x6.00-20	3.45	1.25
33x6.00-21	3.65	1.25
32x6.50-20	3.75	1.35

TRUCK BALLOONS

Size	Tires	Tubes
6.00-20	$3.75	$1.65
7.00-20	5.95	2.95
7.50-20	6.95	3.75

REG. CORD TIRES

Size	Tires	Tubes
30x3	$2.25	$0.65
30x3½	2.35	0.75
31x4	2.95	0.85
32x4	2.95	0.85
33x4	2.95	0.85
32x4½	3.35	1.15
33x4½	3.45	1.15
34x4½	3.45	1.15
30x5	3.65	1.35
33x5	3.75	1.45

TRUCK TIRES

Size	Tires	Tubes
30x6	$4.25	$1.95
32x6—8-ply	6.95	2.75
32x6—10-ply	7.95	2.75
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"Make your report!" Jimmie commanded the dying Russian

The Mad Monks

By W. WIRT

Author of "The White War Lords," "Ammunition Up!" etc.

Novelette—Complete

Spies of three nations wanted those railroad plans for Chinese Turkestan—and so did Jimmie Cordie

CHAPTER I.

VALUABLE PLANS.

"CHINESE," Jimmie Cordie announced as he looked through his glasses. "A survey party. Can you see the instruments, Zagatai?"

The young Uryankhes Tartar, son of Sahet Khan, who lay beside Jimmie Cordie on a rock ledge far up on the side of a mountain in the Thian Shan range, Sinkiang province, northwestern China, smiled as he answered, "Yes, blood brother of my father, I can see them. Now they take them to a tent—and now they begin to wrap them in cloth."

He did not need glasses to see distinctly what was going on at a camp pitched near one of the main passes. The eyes of the young chieftain were like those of an eagle.

"We're in the territory of the war lord Ning-Wu," Jimmie went on. "He must have authorized the survey. They may be his men."

"Shall we go down and ask, mighty one?" Zagatai replied, his thin, dark, proud face and fierce eyes lighting up with a smile.

That there were of the hunting

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Some were Russian, some Japanese

party that had left the encampment of the Uryankhes the week before, less than thirty men including five officers of the Big Swords, and at least three hundred Chinese in sight at the camp, made no difference to Zagatai, aged sixteen. The Uryankhes Tartars firmly believed that they could ride over and through any men, no matter what the odds against them.

"The Big Swords are at peace with the war lord Ning-Wu," Jimmie answered. He was also thin faced, dark and black-eyed. Second in command of all Big Swords, who were fighting the Japanese in Manchukuo, the slim, wiry American, one of the most famous soldiers of fortune in the Orient, was both liked and highly respected for his fighting ability by all men who fought in the far places.

"But just why he is making a survey here is— See that, Zagatai! A fight has started and—here comes a bunch from behind that pile of camp gear to get in it. Holy Moses! It's a regular Kilkenny cat fight."

Zagatai did not know what a regular Kilkenny fight was, but he knew a fight when he saw it. He watched, his delicate nostrils flaring out a little, dancing lights coming into his eyes. A fight, and Uryankhes Tartars watching it instead of— He turned a little so as to face Jimmie Cordie. "They fight, and we remain here?"

Jimmie laughed. He knew what Zagatai meant. Sahet Khan, who ruled twenty thousand Uryankhes with an iron hand, when he detailed his favorite son to go with the hunting party, had warned Zagatai to "obey all commands given by my blood brother as my commands are obeyed." Zagatai wanted to get into the fight and if Jimmie Cordie had not been there, by now the Uryankhes would have been riding down hell for leather to do it.

"Let's wait a minute and see. There go five or six men for the horse line. They are shooting their way, and— they are Japs."

"Yes, war captain of the Big Swords. See, other men run now back

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of the pile—they mount. Eight, ten, twelve of them. See! The Chinese open fire!"

"The Japs jumped the Chinese for something and got it. Then the bunch that—"

"They turn to the right. We can cut them off at the river."

"I guess we'd better do it. Those birds that came from the pile are Russians, unless my eyes and my glasses are both cock-eyed. We'll ask them a few questions and then ask the Chinese a few more."

A FATALLY wounded Russian sat on the ground, his back against a rock. On the ground near him were the bodies of twelve men, three of them Japanese, the others Russians.

Jimmie Cordie knelt beside him. Back a little ways there stood Zagatai, the Big Sword officers and the Uryankhes Tartars. The hunting party did not arrive in time to cut the fleeing men off, but did before the Russian died.

Blood trickled from his lips as he spoke. He told Jimmie Cordie of how his party arrived to seize the survey notes, only to find that some Japanese had beaten them to it. He had met Jimmie once, after the war, in Hongkong.

"...and so, they suddenly attacked the tent—of the leader—of—the survey party. I cannot—go on. My wife and children are—are—in Hongkong. I ask that you take—care of them, Captain Cordie."

"I will take care of your wife and family, Colonel Radischev," Jimmie said distinctly. "Hold fast and tell me what has happened. You are an officer and a gentleman—hold fast and tell me."

"The Chinese have made a—survey of the passes for the—war lord here. I am—I am—"

"Attention!" Jimmie Cordie rasped. "Make your report, Colonel Radischev. The Chinese have made a survey—for what?"

"For—for a railroad, excellency."

"The Japanese came to seize it and you did the same for the Soviet?"

"Yes. I am—a Russian. Your country—is friend of mine now.—Don't let—my enemies keep it—promise me, Captain Cordie—I gave my life for it—save it—" The head of the Russian, who had once commanded a regiment in the War, fell forward as his spirit left his body.

THREE Japanese Intelligence officers rode swiftly through the hills toward the south. One of them carried, under his tunic, a red leather case, about four inches wide by ten or eleven long.

Inside the case were the complete survey notes for a single track railroad from Jarkent on the Siberian side to Saram-por on the Chinese Turkestan side.

"We win through, major," one of them said as their horses splashed through a little stream. "The Chinese did all the work—and now we have the survey."

The officer addressed smiled. "And also we have the satisfaction of having sent quite a few of the Red mongrels to hell. That alone—"

They pulled up their horses as they reached the bank. In front of them, not a hundred feet away, there had risen Chinese infantry. On the left and right and to their rear troops also showed.

The Japanese major cursed softly under his breath and as the young lieu-

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tenant's hand went to revolver butt, said, "No. Take your hand away, Lieutenant Morioka. Resistance is useless. It may be a chance encounter."

From the troops in front a girl had ridden forward, accompanied by two Chinese officers. She was slender and beautiful, dressed in immaculate whipcord riding trousers, white flannel shirt, brown leather riding boots and little white felt hat perched jauntily on her sleek young head. Her eyes were hyacinth blue, her hair bronzed gold, her skin a rich creamy white. Elizabeth Montague, special agent for war lords and potentates, patrician Englishwoman from the top of her head to the tips of her little white toes.

The three Japanese officers sat their horses, their faces impassive as the girl and the Chinese officers trotted briskly up. The eyes of the major tightened a little as the girl and her escort came closer. He had heard of the English girl who had outplayed many intelligence men.

"Who are you?" she demanded curtly, after she reined her horse to a halt within a few feet of the Japanese.

She spoke in Chinese, but before Major Osaka could answer, laughed and went on, in English, "Oh, I see. Japanese."

"That is correct," Major Osaka answered in English. "We are Japanese— And you?"

"I am Elizabeth Montague, agent of the Lord of Sin-hsai-tung." She turned to the Chinese officers. "Search them."

Ten minutes later the Japanese were on their way once more, this time without the red leather case full of survey notes.

She watched them for a moment or so, then said, "They will ride for the Japanese outpost at Hami. If they win to it they will try for us at the river. We will go south for fifty miles, then east once more on the far side of the Anu hills."

To herself she added, "And soon I will sell the survey to Nippon or Soviet."

It was the correct thing to do, but in doing it, she and her escort got too close to the border of the Kara-Kara sand. And the mad priests of Kara-Kara attack any and all who do that.

CHAPTER II.

"HOUSE OF LORDS."

THE Uryankhes and the Big Sword officers rode fast on the trail of the Japanese, but it was twelve hours later when they pulled up their horses at the stream where Elizabeth Montague had taken the red leather case away from Major Osaka. The Japs had been mounted on fresh, fast horses and kept well ahead of those who followed.

The hoofprints of other horses were seen and after the Uryankhes had circled and reported that a large body of men had lain in ambush, Jimmie Cordie said, "Some outfit gathered them in and then turned them loose. The great question before the House of Lords is, was the red leather case taken away from them, or not?"

The "House of Lords," at the moment, consisted of the other four Big Sword officers and Zagatai. The Big Swords were all, with the exception of the Fighting Yid, men who had served in the Foreign Legion with Jimmie Cordie. The Yid, born on Hester Street, New York, and named Abraham Cohen, received his nick-

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name in the A. E. F., where he had been first sergeant of a machine gun company.

One of them, a tall, lean, lanky man, answered Jimmie.

"Well, Jeems, there is only one way I know of to find out. Keep on after the Japs until we catch them, and if they haven't got the said case, persuade them to tell us who has."

He was the Boston Bean, born in Boston, Massachusetts, named John Cabot Winthrop. Called anything that even remotely suggested Boston.

"Oi, vot a brilliant suggestion," the Yid said. "Und if dey haven't got it, by de time ve find it out, whoever has is all de vay to de Rock Candy Mountains. Tell you vot, Jimmie. Send it some of de Uryankhes after de Japs und ve vill follow de—"

Some twenty-odd Chinese soldiers came out of the timber near the stream. It could be plainly seen that they were two-thirds scared to death as well as wholly exhausted. They saw the dreaded Uryankhes, turned as if to go back into the timber, hesitated as if trying to choose between two evils, and then halted.

"Shall we bring them to you?" Zagatai asked eagerly.

"If they saw Uryankhes riding toward them their hearts would stop beating. You and I will go to them, son of my blood brother," Jimmie answered.

There was an old officer with the Chinese who could speak a little English. He did not care at all for the close proximity of a Uryankhes, but Jimmie Cordie's friendly, clean-cut, Anglo-Saxon face reassured him.

The story he told was disconnected and took a long time to tell. The gist of it was that Elizabeth Montague, the golden one, had taken from some Japanese a red leather case and then allowed the Japanese to go. The regiment had then headed south. Close to a sand waste there had come a sudden attack made by swarms of madmen, armed with swords, bows and arrows and lances.

Thousands of them, according to the officer. He had been in command of the rear guard and, by chance, close to a pass that led up into the hills. Seeing that the regiment was going to be wiped out, he started up the pass with what men he had left. The madmen came up the narrow pass after them, until darkness came. What happened to the golden one he did not know. All he knew was that he finally won clear with what men the "lesplendent war captain sees."

"You are safe now, elder brother," Jimmie said. "Take your men to the stream and rest. The city of the war lord Shen is not far from here. He is a friend of your lord and will take care of you."

AS Jimmie and Zagatai rode back, Jimmie translated for Zagatai what the Chinese had told.

"I have heard of the mad jackals," Zagatai said, "but thought it mostly campfire tales. We will ride back to my father. Then we of the Uryankhes will see if they can wipe us out as they have done this Chinese regiment."

"First we ride to where the fight was. It may be that the golden one told of by the Chinese officer escaped in some way, as he did. Although, from what I've heard of her, she probably died right there, fighting."

Red Dolan, one of the Big Sword officers, riding beside Jimmie Cardie, asked, "Jimmie, what the hell is it all about?" From the day Red met Jimmie in the Legion, life had been

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greatly simplified for the big Irishman. He would ask, "What now, Jimmie?" or "How about that?" and the answer always satisfied Red.

"What is what all about?"

"The whole thing, Jimmie darlin'. What is this survey thing ye are after and the madmen and all? Who is this girl that took the damn thing from the little midgets?"

"She is an Englishwoman, Red. I don't know such a heck of a lot about her any more than she is supposed to be one of the most clever special agents in the Orient. And, just between you and me and the tall hills on your left, I have also heard that she doesn't allow very much to stop her when she goes after anything. There have been rumors, Mr. Dolan, that more than one man has been sent on high by the fair Montague.

"The way I got it from a man who knew her is that she can outplay most men and when she can't—why, it is just too bad for the man who blocks her off, if she can make it that way. Probably there is a lot of exaggeration, Red. She may be entirely different. All I really know is that she has worked for some pretty hard-boiled war lords, generals, and what not."

"Do ye think the madmen have killed her, Jimmie?"

"Chances are they have."

"Jimmie, who are they?"

"Well, Red, I don't know very much about them, either. And nothing first hand. South of us a few miles, the Kara-Kara sands begin. All route armies, caravans, raiding parties of hillmen and other outfits keep as far away from Kara-Kara as they can, for two or three reasons.

"The commander of the Chinese regiment and Elizabeth Montague evidently were in the same position you are, Red. They never heard about the mad priests of Kara-Kara, either."

"Any wan would think that a full regiment armed wid guns could smack down a lot av madmen. Maybeso it was because they was Chinks."

"Your opinion of Chinese fighting ability is not very flattering, Mr. Dolan," Jimmie answered, with a grin.

"Maybeso, Jimmie. Go on wid it."

"Before I do I'll tell you that General Kai-Lun got tangled in the Kara-Kara with his route army—and only a few men came out. You will have to admit that old Kai-Lun and his route army could do some fighting."

"They could. Did the madmen get them?"

"From what I heard, the madmen did. Well, as I said, there are more things than the madmen to buck. No water, no forage, wind all the time blowing sand in your face."

"How do the madmen live there, then?"

"The mad priests of Kara-Kara live on top of a hill about in the center of the Kara-Kara. Once, many hundreds of years ago, one of the Tartar lords who had fought under Genghis Khan built a great stone city there. He—"

"What did he do for water?"

"For Pete's sake! You big red-headed ape, will you quit interrupting me?"

"Ye jump around so, ye black muzzled shrimp av the world. Tell me plain and—"

"I jump around? Go on back with the Yid and the Bean. The Yid knows about the Kara-Kara."

"That gibbon? He'd start in tellin' lies. I'm shut, Jimmie darlin'. Go ahead and tell me. Divil a time will I interrupt ye again."

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"See that you don't. The Tartar lord found on top of the hill heap plenty springs. Alle same oasis, Mr. Dolan."

"How do ye know what he found?" Red asked, forgetting all about his promise.

JIMMIE CORDIE grinned. "I ought to know. I was there with him. In those dear, long-past days I commanded a squadron of cavalry for Genghis—"

"Will ye stop that and tell me?"

"I am telling you. Listen, Red, no foolin'. If you interrupt me once more I won't tell you a darn thing. Now—how long the mad priests have been there, how they got there, what they have to eat, or where they get it, I don't know.

"All I know is this. There are thousands of them and they are scrappers from who laid the chunk. They take on any and all and up to date no outfit that got tangled up with them has won clear."

Red studied that for a moment, then stated firmly, "I'll bet ye that the old First Regiment av the Legion could run them scuts so far off the hill that they'd never find the way back, them that was left to do it."

"No doubt about it, Mr. Dolan. But the First is far away and—"

"Jimmie, are they really madmen?"

"Depends on who is talking. They probably don't think they are at all. I guess there is no question, Red, but what they do things that class them as mad—as far as any so-called civilized people go."

"And them scuts have killed the fightin' English girl, have they? What are we goin' to do, Jimmie?"

"Find out whether they have or not, if we can. I hope she holed up somewhere. If she did, we'll take her to Shen."

"How about the thing ye are after? Will ye take it away from her?"

"First catch the rabbit. Far be it from me to take anything away from a lady. I am deeply grieved, Mr. Dolan."

"Oh, are ye? Well, she took it away from the pink-toed banties, didn't she? 'Tis only right that some wan takes it from her."

"Well, if she is still alive, you can be the one to go up to her and say, 'Hand over the red leather case, or I'll smack you out of your shoes.' She will take one look at you and hand it right over."

"What? Me? Make a threat to a woman? Double shame on ye, Jimmie Cordie, for even—"

Zagatai rode up. "There are bodies ahead in a valley. The Chinese mongrel spoke truly, mighty one."

CHAPTER III.

CONDEMNED.

THE abbot of the mad priests sat in a high-backed, throne-like chair on a dais built against the south wall of what once had been a temple. He was a man of about sixty, grossly built, fat-bellied, fat-cheeked, and triple-chinned. His little, pig-like eyes slanted up at the corners, showing Chinese blood. His high cheek-bones and bat-wing ears denoted some Tartar. The thick lips and splayed-out nostrils told of an African ancestor. He looked like something seen in a nightmare. And the cruel, mocking light in his eyes and the bestial smile on his lips did nothing to lessen the nightmare effect. Rather, they added to it.

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Both he and his clothes, a filthy conglomeration of sheepskins and quilted cotton robes, looked as if they had never been washed.

On a table, placed about two feet in front of his chair, there rested a green jade carving. It was of three fish, each with tail in the mouth of the other, forming a circle. The bellies of the fish rested on a slab of green jade, about a foot wide and a foot and a half long. The fish were delicately and accurately carved; the eyes were emeralds.

Before the dais there crouched a Chinese boy. A little to the left and behind him stood Elizabeth Montague. Back of her stood one of the mad priests.

She stood there, her lovely blue eyes calm and impersonal.

The English girl was in a bad jam and she knew it. Yet she stood erect and faced the abbot with absolutely no show of fear, although she thought her death by torture, unless she could find some way to kill herself, was a question of minutes.

The abbot snarled something in a tongue unknown to her and the Chinese boy translated.

"The all-powerful one says that you are not Chinese. Who are you?"

"I am English," Elizabeth answered.

That did not mean anything to the abbot and after staring at her for a moment he spoke again.

"The mighty ruler of the world say that soon you will dance on the hot stones so that three sacred ones may be pleased."

In the few short hours she had been in the captive pen, Elizabeth had seen other captives dragged out of it—men, women and children—and then heard agonized screams and wails for mercy that lasted a long time. But she answered, contemptuously:

"Tell him I am not afraid of him and that I will not dance anywhere on anything to please the three sacred ones or any one else. My friends will pay him much gold for me—and if anything happens to me they will slay him and all his priests."

The Chinese boy had no intention whatsoever of repeating what she said to the abbot. He was afraid that if he did, a whip might curl around his body which was still sore from the last whipping he had received. So he translated that the maiden bowed to the abbot in all things and would dance whenever the abbot desired her to do it.

The abbot listened, then grunted a few words.

The mad priest behind Elizabeth touched her on the arm. She turned and walked back to the captive pen, her head still high.

Inside the stone walls that enclosed about two acres of ground there were two hundred-odd huts, or hovels. They were made of wood, stone, hides and anything else that could be used on sides and roof. The mad priests evidently had trade relations with some tribe near the sands, for there were sides of boxes and burlap bags that bore Chinese and Persian markings. What the priests traded for foodstuffs there was no way of knowing. It may be that they had found the treasure of the old Tartar lord who had ridden with Genghis Khan.

ELIZABETH had been literally tossed into one of them and a little later had been searched by two old hags. The search was for anything she could kill herself with. Her clothes the Oriental women scorned, hence did not take. The red leather case

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was opened and, after it was seen to contain only papers, tossed into a corner.

The hovels were filthy inside, so Elizabeth walked over toward the south wall and sat down on a bowlder. There were a good many other women, as well as men and children, sitting or standing around, waiting for the mad priests to come for them.

As long as Elizabeth had been there she had seen no food brought in and most of the faces of the captives were gray with fear and starvation.

She had been in tight places before and gotten out. But this time there was no out she could figure—except one. That she should escape from the mad priests and make her way across the sand to the hills and once in them win through to a friendly war lord, weaponless and alone, was not within the bounds of possibility—and she knew it.

There was only one thing she could do, and that was to get close to one of the mad priests and try for his sword or dagger. Once she had it—she smiled a little as the thought came to her—she would do what dancing was required somewhere else than on earth.

As she smiled, the sun came out from behind a cloud and a ray slanted down on the roof of her hovel. By chance she was facing so that she saw a glint of what looked like steel. She looked closer and saw that the reflection came from a piece of iron band that had been left around a box top. It was half torn off, about six inches long, sharp and jagged at the torn end.

She looked at it for a moment, then smiled again. There was no need for her to try to get close to a mad priest. She rose and sauntered carelessly over to her hovel.

THE valley in which the mad priests made their attack on the Chinese regiment escorting Elizabeth Montague was a bloody shambles of the dead. The Chinese had fought manfully to protect "the golden one," and for their lives, as the bodies of hundreds of the mad priests attested. The dead of the mad priests had been big, lean, hairy men, some of them naked to the waist, some entirely naked save for a loin cloth and some few with long black robes, black hats that looked a good deal like old fashioned women's bonnets. On the feet of those that were robed were sandals. The mad priests were not all of one race or tribe. They seemed to be a mixture of all Oriental peoples. Some looked as if they had Tartar or Manchu blood, others seemed more like Chinese, Persians or Mongols.

There were guns, swords, lances, bows and arrows scattered around everywhere. It was evident that the mad priests who survived the attack had made no attempt to pick up weapons or to bury their dead.

Near the body of the colonel of the regiment Jimmie Cordie found an empty Webley revolver, a natty little white felt hat and a riding glove. The Uryankhes had ranged the hills, and if Elizabeth Montague had escaped they would have found her.

The battlefield was searched, and at last Jimmie Cordie said, "Well, they've got her. For some unknown reason they took her alive."

"Und avay goes it de red leather case," the Yid added.

Jimmie Cordie's eyes, which usually held an amused smile, grew cold as he stared at the Yid. Finally he said,

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"The red leather case, Mr. Cohen, has become of secondary importance."

"Vot? Oi, Jimmie! Excuse me, I esk you. I didn't mean to—"

"All right, Abie. It's a heck of a good plan to think once in a while before speaking."

"That Yid gibbon think?" scoffed Red. "What wid? He has no brains to—"

"That will be for a little while. Let's get down to it. They have probably taken her to G. H. Q. We'll go and get her."

"Come on," said Red. "What are ye waitin' for?"

A man fully as big as Red laughed. "Let's wait a minute, Red. Jimmie, you say we are going to get her. What with? A few Uryankhes Tartars and our thirty-thirty rifles? We won't get to first base, let alone to—"

"Have I lived to see the day that ye back away from anything, George Grigsby?" demanded Red. "What do ye care how far we get?"

Grigsby, ex-Foreign Legion and major of infantry, A. E. F., known in the Orient as "a damn good man to have along," smiled at Red.

"I don't—but Miss Montague might, old-timer. I was going to suggest that we try to plan something that at least has a chance of succeeding."

"Right ye are, George. Think up something, Jimmie."

"It may take me all of three minutes, Red. George is right about our not getting to first base. To take anything away from the mad priests of Kara-Kara by force would require a—"

"Jeems," the Boston Bean interrupted, "I have just had a brilliant thought."

The Bean always looked mournful and sleepy. It was a very misleading look. The Bean was reckless, happy-go-lucky, and always wide awake.

"YEAH? We've had experience with your brilliant thoughts, Codfish, and most of the time soon afterward we wake up in the hospital to hear the nurse say, 'Take this nice medicine.' What is this one?"

"You wrong me, Jeems. Well—"

"Wrong ye, ye Bosting bean-eater? Can wan spoil a bad egg? I'll answer me own question. They cannot. Av all the—"

"Put a jaw tackle on, you big red-headed ape. Is this the time for broadcasting? There is a girl in the hands of the mad priests and every minute counts. You know what they do to captives? They have torture down to a science. If you can't help us frame something, at least keep that big mouth of yours shut. And that goes for you, too, Yid."

"Oi, vos I sayink anythink, Jimmie?"

"No, but you looked as if you were going to. Let's have it, Bean."

"Well, the brilliant thought is—we become mad priests."

"What? Listen, Codfish. What I told Red and the Yid goes for you, also. This isn't a case of our lives being in danger. There is a girl in—"

"So you just said," the Bean answered gravely. "I'm not kidding, Jeems, me good man. We become mad priests, walk calmly across the sand, arrive at the hill in the darkness, find out where Miss Montague is held, get her and serenely walk back to the hills whistling 'God Save the King.'"

"'Tis goofy ye are, yerself," Red said with deep conviction.

"He is, like heck. Bean, in my next

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army you may be a proud and haughty corporal. It was a brilliant thought that has made up for all your darn unbrilliant ones. Let's see what we can do toward becoming mad priests. We'll strap our forty-fives next to our skins and—"

"Wait," commanded Red. "Do ye mean to say that we are goin' to put on them damn robes and them bonnets and—the skins av us is white under our clothes, Jimmie. Look at them bare legs and them little what-you-may-call-'ems. Am I to walk across the hot sands wid them things on the feet av me?"

"They are called sandals, Mr. Dolan. Yes, you are to walk across the hot sands with them on your feet, and furthermore, you are going to like it."

"I am like hell. Why can't we—"

"We could, but we don't intend to. We'll send Zagatai and the Tartars home, cache our rifles and clothes and trust that the Nine Red Gods will play on our side."

Zagatai did not see that going home thing at all. He wanted to stick right along, but finally Jimmie convinced him that the Uryankhes would only add to the danger of being discovered.

A small party could go where a larger one could not. Five mad priests straggling along would not attract the attention that a body of twenty-odd would. Privately Jimmie was afraid that the hot tempered Uryankhes, who held all other tribes in contempt, would at once start a fight, irrespective of odds, once they were close to the mad priests.

He told Zagatai that the thing for him, Zagatai, to do was to ride as fast as he could to the main encampment of the Uryankhes and return with a strong column.

"Then, when we are followed from the hill, after having rescued the golden one, the Uryankhes can drive the mad priests back."

That pleased Zagatai, who answered, "You will see us ride over the mad dogs, grinding their faces into the sand with the hoofs of our horses."

CHAPTER IV.

OVER THE SAND.

RED looked at the Boston Bean. "Ye know what ye look like to me? Ye look like something the cat brought in."

"Oh, do I? Have you any idea what you look like, me good man? Any self-respecting cat would take one look at you and then step around you."

"Und dot is smacking de big Irisher vare he lives," the Yid announced, as he wiped the sweat from his eyes. "Vy can't it you alvays look like a gentleman, Mistaire Dolan, like I do?"

Words failed Red. He opened his mouth to say something, could not think of anything bad enough, so contented himself with glaring at the smirking Yid.

They were then ten miles across the sands and, up to the time Red spoke, had seen nothing of the mad priests. At the battlefield the Boston Bean had acted as director and chief costumer. He ordered them back to where there was some dirt and mold, each man carrying a desert water bag of which there were plenty where the mad priests had discarded them to charge. Each man also carried a long black robe, a bonnet and a pair of sandals.

Red protested bitterly at being "all smeared up wid di-ert-ty dirt," and the possibilities of there being cooties

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in the robes. He was a cleanly, fastidious soul, but all his protests got him from the Bean was more dirt. All of their faces and hands were deeply bronzed and none of them carried any excess fat. Their feet were white, but not after the Bean passed them as O. K.

At last he said, "Well, I guess you'll do. Red, a little more dirt under your left eye wouldn't hurt. You look very mad, but not quite mad enough to suit me."

Red's answer to that reached new heights, even for him, and ended with, "Tend to yerself, ye long-legged cross between a Bosting jacksnipe and a black and white kitty."

"Outside of that, the red-headed ape likes me," the Bean answered. "If we don't sweat it off before we've gone a mile, we'll pass anything but a close inspection. Take the deck once more, Jeems."

They cached their clothes and rifles and horse equipment and hid the horses in a little blind cañon. Their .45 Colts with belts heavy with ammunition they wore next to their skins as suggested by Jimmie Cordie. And each of them, also at his suggestion, cut a slit in the robe so he could get at the Colt in a hurry. At the battlefield they each picked up what weapons they fancied. Red, Grigsby, the Yid and the Bean took sword and lance. Jimmie Cordie took a sword and then picked up a long bow and a quiver full of arrows.

"What are ye takin' that damn thing for?" Red demanded.

"Because, Red, I am one of the kind of archers you read about. I've always wanted to go into battle with a long bow. I can send an arrow four hundred yards with—"

"You mean by, Jeems. By express. Now, we will all take the water bags and trip gayly on our way," the Bean announced, forgetting he had just "given the deck" to Jimmie Cordie.

AS the Yid asked Red why he could not always look like a gentleman, Jimmie Cordie, who had been a little ahead with Grigsby, dropped back.

"We'll have to hit it up, gents. I've heard that the hill is about thirty miles from the border of the sands. We've gone about ten, and it's four o'clock. If we don't arrive and do our searching and what not in the dark, we're sunk."

"Oi," the Yid mourned, "hit it up? How can ve did it, I esk you? I sink it up to de knees now mit every step." The Yid was very nearly as broad as he was long, with powerful shoulders and arms long enough for him to touch his knees with clenched fists without stooping.

Red claimed that the Yid was first cousin to—and looked like—a gorilla. And there were men in the Orient who stated they had just as soon tackle the gorilla as the Yid when he was really angry.

However, Red's statement was highly exaggerated. The Yid's face, in repose, was like the face of some Hebrew patriarch of olden days.

"THE benighted Hester Street scut can't take it, Jimmie," Red said. "Let's carry the—"

"Vot? I can't take it? Start runnink, Jimmie. I vill show it dis—"

"You two kidders better save what energy you've got. You better dirty up your face, Yid. You've wiped off most of the camouflage. Red, you and I will set the pace."

"How far is it, Jimmie?"

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"Well, if the hill is thirty miles in, and if we have gone ten, if I haven't forgotten how to subtract, it is twenty miles, Mr. Dolan. Come on, we'll send George back to keep these two synthetic mad priests company."

"Good-by, Yid. I know ye can't keep up. Dig a hole in the sand and cover yerself all but the nose av ye. I hope wan of the real quill comes along and steps on it for ye. We'll be seein' you on the way back."

"Take it me up dere mit, Jimmie. I vill run dis Irish bummer down to a visper."

"I bet you. Try it on the way home. I have a feeling we are going to get plenty of that running thing. Come on, Mr. Dolan. Never mind answering Mr. Cohen."

It was hard going, very hard. The wind blew continually, driving sand in their faces and eyes. It was hot and the humidity was frightful.

But they were a hard-bitten crowd, and all of them "in the pink." They needed to be to cross the Kara-Kara sands. Red walked silently beside Jimmie Cordie for a few minutes and then said, "Jimmie, tell me about the survey thing."

"What?" Jimmie had been thinking of a girl in the hands of the mad priests and had been offering up little prayers, although he was not what is known as a religious man, that they had not harmed her.

"Tell me about what the Russian had and why the little pink-toed midgets wanted it. How come if he was a Russian did he want to sell it to the Soviet?"

"Well—while we are taking a pleasant walk before supper, I'll tell you all I know, Red. It isn't much."

The Yid came up and fell in behind Jimmie.

"Vot is de idea of draggink de line dis vay? My, such slow valkers. I vill set it de pace from now on. Take it hold of my hand, Irisher."

"What? 'Twas slow we was goin' because av ye, ye monkey-faced, flat-footed cross between a—"

"Do you want to hear the how-come?" demanded Jimmie.

"Sure I do. Wait till I put this Hester Street Yid in the proper place av him."

"That's just what I don't want to hear, Mr. Dolan. The chatter of you two chimpanzees gets on my nerves."

"Ye? Wid nerves? I never thought ye had any, Jimmie darlin'. Keep the mouth av ye shut, Abie. Jimmie is nervous."

JIMMIE laughed. "Not quite as bad as that, old kid. But right now I can do without a lot of wah-wah."

"I'm shut, Jimmie."

"All right. I'll start off. But listen: one more interruption and back to the rear you'll both go. Red, this is short and sweet, principally short. In the last twenty years of the nineteenth century, the Russians started to build a lot of railroads. The most important at the moment is the Siberian. The first section was started from Chelyabinski to Omsk.

"A little later the Russians started to build the Pacific end from Vladivostok to Khabarovsk, which is some four hundred and seventy miles north of Vladivostok. Get that place in your head, Red. It is where the Soviet is massing troops—big and little guns—planes and what not. The Japs will try for Vladivostok and then Khabarovsk. Then they will try for Chita and Irkutsk. If they can take the last two, they have the Soviet blocked off from

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Manchuria and also from Vladivostok and the North. The Chinese and the Russians built the Chinese Eastern to—"

"Jimmie, what the hell has all this to do wid the case we was after till we found out about the girl?"

"Everything. Here — the Soviet knows that if the Japs can knock 'em off the Christmas tree anywhere along the Chinese Eastern the other side of Manchuria, especially at Omsk, Irkutsk or at Chita, they will be in a bad way, as far as holding anything south and east of the Siberian border. That is the reason the Soviet is double tracking the line as fast as they can and also massing troops from Khabarovsk to Chita. It is a case of—"

"I'll take the word av ye for it. All ye are doin' is gettin' me all mixed up. Tell me plain."

"I'm trying to, Red. Listen. The Soviet has known for a long time that the Japs would try to cut them off and —holy cats! Wait until I tighten my belt. It's taking the skin off my left side."

"Mine has taken the skin av me off both sides. Tuck the robe av ye up and use it as a pad like I have done."

"I'll tighten it up a hole. No likee the feel of this felt or whatever it is. Where was I?"

"Ye said that the Soviet knew that the little bamalams would try to cut them off."

"That's right. So the Soviet, as quietly as they could do 'er, have been putting down track from Omsk to Jarkent on the Siberian side. Now, to get into Manchuria—"

"De track is all down," the Yid stated.

"And how the hell and gone do ye know?" demanded Red scornfully.

"Vy shouldn't it I know, Irisher? I vos dere ven dey did it as chief engineer of de whole cheese. Dot reminds me of another song. 'Oh, I'm de chief engineer of a von shirt laundry, down on de river ba-ha—ank.' You vish to hear it de rest of de song, redheadt?"

"While you are deciding, Red, I will drop back with George and the Bean. You two double morons would make a preacher put his Bible down and—"

"Don't do it, Jimmie darlin'. I will ignore the Yid scut as a gentleman and a Dolan should. Get on wid the story."

JIMMIE CORDIE laughed. "You have got me so mixed up myself that I don't know where to get on from. Maybe this will make it clear to you, Red. The Soviet wants to come through the Thian Shan with a railroad so they can come up through the Khanates if the Japs take the Chinese Eastern. By doing that, the Soviet can still unload troops in Manchuria."

"But, Jimmie, 'tis all av a thousand miles from Omsk to the Thian Shan where we are."

"I know it is—and another thousand or so through the Khanates. But two or three hundred thousand men, when they are Reds, can lay a whole lot of track in a day, Mr. Dolan. Ask Chief Engineer Cohen about it if you don't think so."

"I'll ask the Yid monkey nawthin'. Go on wid it."

"All right. The Chinese were making the survey, or rather had made it. The Japs knew about it and tried for the notes after it was finished. Some Russians did also. The Japs—"

"The Russians tried for it for the Soviet? But if they did, what did that fellow mean by tellin' ye to sell it to

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them? If he was van av them, is the scut sellin' out his own side?"

"There are a lot of Russians, Red, who are for Russia but not for the Soviet. That bird was one of them. How he got the dope about the survey I don't know. Evidently he got some of his sidekickers and came up to get it, hoping to make a sale of it to the Soviet for enough to put himself and his family on Easy Street. Maybe he was going to sell it to the Japs, for all I know.

"But at the last, he wanted Russia to have it."

"Why should the little dish-faced polecats want it? They ain't buildin' a railroad too, are they?"

"No. But as long as they have it the Soviet hasn't, sabe? It takes time to make a survey through a mountain range."

"Well, why can't the Soviet or the Chinks make another?"

"They can, but in the meantime, heap plenty things can happen. The war lord Ming-kai was probably fooled into thinking the survey was for China. If I get back I'll see that he is disillusioned, by gosh. And also see that the Uryankhes and the Altai Tartars are— Heads up! Let George and the Bean catch up with us. Here comes seven or eight of the real thing. We will let them make any play. Our game is to plod along, ignoring them."

"Sure," the Yid said with a grin, "just as if ve had known it dem for years und never did like dem anyvay. Keep it de bonnet on, Irisher. If dey see it de red-head, maybeso dere ain't no mad priest red-heads."

"And ye keep that hook nose av ye outta sight. Maybeso there ain't any mad priest Yids, either."

The Yid and Jimmie both laughed, and Jimmie said:

"That is good advice for both of you to take."

CHAPTER V.

HAND TO HAND.

THERE were seven of the mad priests in the party that came up. Three of them with robes, sandals and bonnets. The other four were naked from the waist up. They all carried desert water bags and swords for weapons. That the mad priests had no suspicion of the little party of five that was walking doggedly along over the sand was evident by the way they came up.

"Our priestly brothers are heading for G. H. Q.," the Bean said, "the same as we are."

"Get all wah-wah out of your systems before they get here," Jimmie ordered. "No talkee at all. We're the kind of mad priests that don't speak. And, if it comes to a show-down—no gun-play. Shots might bring eight hundred and sixty more of them. We'll take them with swords."

"Don't forget the bow and arrows av ye," Red said. "Try it out on the scuts. 'Tis well widin' four hundred yards, me bucko archer."

"Steady," Grigsby warned. "They are getting close enough to see lips move."

The mad priests were all big men, and if they were maniacs or crazy men they did not show it very much. Two or three of them had a vacant, staring look in their eyes and three of the others had wild, cunning looking eyes. But there was no yelling or dancing.

One, a black robed and bonneted man, had cold blue eyes that appeared to be absolutely sane. He seemed to be the leader.

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They came up on an angle and did not attempt to mix in with the party of five they had joined. The soldiers of fortune were walking now in wedge formation, not as if premeditatedly but as if by chance. Jimmie Cordie was the point, then came the Bean and Grigsby, then, just a little way out, the Yid and Red. The mad priests came up on the Yid's right, Red being to his left.

They were bunched, more or less, the leader a little ahead. When he got up to Jimmie Cordie they slacked down their pace and began plodding along also. Nothing was said and none of the mad priests looked closely at individuals of the party they had come up with.

It wasn't a place conducive to conversation anyway. The wind was blowing sand as it does a sleeting rain. All of the priests, mad and synthetic, had their heads bowed and their bodies bent forward, bucking it. Half an hour went past, an hour. And there happened what Jimmie Cordie had hoped would not happen. Red had said, "Maybeso there ain't any mad priest Yids, either." He need not have used the word "maybeso."

The bonnets they wore had attached, on either side, long streamers of the same cloth they were made of. They were patently used to tie the bonnet on by knotting under the chin. The soldiers of fortune had all done that, after they had all chased their bonnets over the sand when they first encountered the wind.

The Fighting Yid, when he began to perspire freely, loosened his. A particularly fierce gust of wind completed the job. At the identical second that it did, the mad priest nearest him turned a little to adjust a water bag. His eyes were on a direct line with the Yid. The wind lifted the bonnet from Mr. Cohen's head and it sailed away. The mad priest looked at the unmistakably Semitic face and, as he looked, let out a wild yell.

Every man, in both parties, that was ahead of him halted and turned. Two or three of the mad priests were behind him, and Red was about on a line.

The mad priest was drawing his sword as he yelled. He yelled again as he charged the Yid, who was only six feet from him.

This time he yelled, "Yehuda!"

AS the man drew his sword, the Yid's right hand flashed in under the robe to the butt of his .45 Colt, then he remembered what Jimmie had said about no shots, which spoke well for the Yid's chilled steel nerves.

He did not have time to draw his sword and he knew it, so he did the next best thing. He was carrying one of the heavy water bags, made of skin with the rope over his left shoulder. His hand left the gun butt and went to the rope, his thumb going under it. His left shoulder went down and his left arm slipped out of the rope. The Yid swung the bag with all the power of his massive shoulders, straight into the face of the mad priest, who went down as if hit on the point of the jaw with a sledge hammer. Almost before he hit the sand the Yid, who was as fast as a black leopard, was on him. One hand closed around the mad priest's sword wrist, the other around his throat.

The mad priest heaved up and almost threw the Yid off. The Yid let go the sword wrist and his left hand and forearm went under the mad priest's body. There was a flurry in

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the sand, and then the Yid got to his feet. The mad priest was dead. What the Yid did to him, only the Yid knew, but whatever it was, it ended all things on earth for one of the mad priests of Kara-Kara.

The leader of the mad priests, thinking only of a Jew being there, turned, drew his sword and started back toward the Yid.

Jimmie Cordie was about three feet ahead of the leader, to the left. Grigsby was closer to another mad priest than he was to the leader when the leader started. The Bean, Red and Grigsby had their swords out. The other mad priests drew at once. But they were surprised, and the soldiers of fortune were not, which gave a distinct edge to the five against the seven, six now, as the Yid rose.

The leader raised the sword to cut Grigsby down as he saw Grigsby engage the mad priest close to him.

The four other mad priests were closer to Red and the Bean than to any one else. The Bean, as the Yid hurled himself at the mad priest, had turned and taken three or four running steps toward the Yid, hoping to arrive in time to block the charge. This, while the Yid was slipping his arm out of the water bag. It put him, with Red, fairly in front of the four mad priests who by now had gotten over their surprise.

Jimmie Cordie, at the point, was in the clear as far as having a foe to face. The longbow was strung and he was carrying it in his left hand. The quiver of arrows was slung over his right shoulder. He ran forward and to the right a little, about two yards. As he ran he plucked an arrow from the quiver and fitted it to the string. Jimmie Cordie was fast on his feet and his brain and muscle coördinated perfectly. He turned, raised the bow, and sent an arrow between the shoulder blades of the leader, to the feathers. He had drawn it to the head. Jimmie did not know it, but he had a Manchu bow of ten strengths, about one hundred and thirty pounds pull. That he could pull an arrow to the head told of the strength the slim, wiry Jimmie Cordie possessed.

The leader dropped his sword and fell forward. Grigsby was outmatched by the other mad priest, who threw Grigsby's blade far out to one side. The mad priest yelled in triumph and lowered his sword for an upward and inward slash. He did not live long enough to complete it. An arrow sank deep into his throat.

NOW the odds had changed. It was four mad priests to five soldiers of fortune. But the four mad priests were all attacking Red and the Bean.

The Yid had put forth every ounce of strength doing what he did to the mad priest, and was staggering toward the Bean and Red to get into the fight. But he was, right then, as he told Jimmie after the fight, "as veak as a sick kitten, ain't it."

Red, running true to form, had taken a couple of steps forward to meet the two mad priests who were charging him. The Boston Bean, more cool-headed, promptly retreated a little way and began circling around. One mad priest was faster than the other of the two that came after the Bean and reached him first.

The Bean was no swordsman and never claimed to be. But he had what the mad priest had not, a clever brain. He sank on one knee as if he had tripped. The mad priest ran in, sword up. The Bean lunged forward and the

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mad priest spitted himself on the Bean's sword. The Bean's long arms also had plenty of strength. The sword point was entering the priest's body before he was close enough to cut down.

Red Dolan, who was all of two hundred and thirty pounds of bone and muscle, was having the time of his life. He dearly loved a fight of any kind and a fight with swords especially appealed to him. He did not care how many swords faced him. He had "wan" for himself and the rest of it was quite all right.

He engaged both priests, roaring out insults in English, the French of the Legion, and whatever other languages he had a few words of.

The robe handicapped him a little, but he held it up in his left hand and went to work.

The mad priest that had been beaten to the Bean arrived. But a second later he joined the other on the sand. Jimmie Cordie put an arrow through the mad priest's stomach and a second later another entered his opened mouth.

The Bean looked around at Jimmie. "The next time, Jeems, me good man, keep those arrows farther out. The feathers of the last one tickled my ear."

"I intended to nick it. Look at Red waving George off! Step to the left, Codfish, you're in my line of— The Yid got one!"

The Yid had received some new strength from a reserve and in spite of Red's orders to "keep away from us, ye Yid gibbon," had, without waiting for the mad priest to turn and defend himself, started a cut from as far back as his right hand would reach. There is no question but what the Yid had, as Jimmie said, got one.

As he did, Red got the other. The priest was a better swordsman than Red, but he didn't have Red's strength and he did not have sense enough to keep away from Red until he could feint Red's sword out of position. He smashed right in and got smashed.

"And that," the Bean said, "is that. I move that from now on, Mr. Cordie's son Jeems packs a bow and arrows. One—two—three men have fallen to his trusty bow. His grandpa drew a good bow at Hastings and—"

"Get to Red! He's going down! Get him, Yid!"

Red had been reached twice by the swords of the mad priests. Once in the left shoulder and once, as he struck down the blade, in the right leg above the knee. He had been standing there, sword in hand, swaying back and forth, putting his whole heart and soul into cursing the Yid with the black curse of Cru'mel for interfering in his business.

The Yid was trying to get a word in edgeways, but not succeeding when Jimmie shouted.

THE BEAN and the Yid both got to Red and eased him to the ground. The mad priest who had gone down coughing blood raised himself on an elbow, pointed a finger at the Yid and began to laugh. As he laughed, the blood poured out of his mouth.

It was a ghastly thing to see, but it did not last long. He stopped laughing, tried to get to his feet, failed to do it, and sank back, dead.

"Oi," the Yid said, "vot a pump dot guy's heart vos."

"Never mind about pumps. Help me get this robe off Red," Jimmie ordered.

Red's wounds were cuts, not very

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deep or long but deep enough to cause him to lose a lot of blood. Jimmie washed the cuts out and then bandaged them with cloth torn from a robe.

That was all he had to do it with. Whether infection would set in or not he did not know, but he had to take the chance.

"Well, we take seven priests for a buggy ride and lose one man doing it. If that proportion holds good, mad priest number thirty-six or seven is going to stand around looking for some one to fight. We'll have to pack Red. He's all right. He's only lost a little blood."

"Maybeso ve can make it a litter mit swords und vater bag skins," the Yid offered.

Two hundred and thirty-odd pounds to carry and four of them to do it. It was hard enough work packing themselves across the sands, yet they laughed as Jimmie answered, "What is the matter, Mr. Cohen? Are you getting feeble? I thought a Cohen could carry a Dolan for a few miles without any trouble. Why the 'we'?"

They made the litter by emptying all but four water bags, then cutting them. The ropes they used to bind them to sword hilts. When it was finished, it wasn't much of a litter, but it bore Red's weight after he was placed on it and it was lifted to the shoulders of Jimmie and the Yid in front, Grigsby and the Bean in the rear.

"All set?" Jimmie asked. "Let's go! *Allons, enfants perdus! Boutez en avant!* In other words, get going."

IT was about two o'clock in the morning when they saw campfires on top of a big hill, about a half a mile dead ahead of them. No more mad priests had been met. Red had regained consciousness after they had packed him three miles. He sat up, nearly wrecking the litter, and demanded, "What the hell is it all about?"

Jimmie Cordie turned his head and issued a few orders to Mr. Dolan. "Get down, you red-headed ape. All the way down on your back. Put that bonnet over your head again. Stay that way until I tell you to get up. You were cut twice and have lost a lot of blood. We'll dispense with any wah-wah from you. If you want to be among those present at the hill, stay down until we reach it."

Red promptly got down, muttering, "Aw, hell, I'm all right."

Jimmie heard him and answered, "Sure you are, old-timer. You'll be a darn sigh righter if you obey orders."

Red did obey the order about getting down and keeping the bonnet over his head, but he kept up a continual grumbling, to which no one paid the slightest attention. Before the hill was sighted there was plenty to occupy their attention besides Red Dolan's broadcasting. Among other things, whether they could stick it or not. The loose sand, the heat, the humidity, the wind blowing sand into their faces, the black robes, the sandals, the belts heavy with ammunition against their naked skins, for a few of the other things.

"Well, we've made it within sight of G. H. Q., anyway," Jimmie said. "Put Mr. Dolan down for a moment or so. Easy does it. Hold your end up, Yid, until we get down to you. Fine. Now—"

Red sat up, tossing the bonnet away from him. "Jimmie, I been thinkin' of it. Where did ye learn to shoot a bow?"

"Well, for Pete's sake! What a time

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to begin asking questions. I was taught how to shoot a bow, Mr. Dolan, by the Uryankhes Tartars. Now you know all about it. How do you feel?"

"I'm all right, Jimmie. The cuts av me are all healed and I feel O. K. Wait, now, I'll get up and show ye."

"No. Sit there until we start up the hill. Those cuts are not healed, you idjut. George, I think we better leave Red here with one of us and—"

"What? Leave me here? Ye will not, Jimmie Cordie! As weak as I am, I'm a damn sight better man than any av ye. Start up the hill and see."

"Not so good, Jimmie," Grigsby said. "That would entail our coming back this way—and the chances are that we are not coming back any way. If we left a man with Red it would weaken us just that much and—"

"My idea, George, is that three men can do just as much as five can. If we are uncovered, it will only take the mad priests just a little less time to mop up on three than it would on five. If we pull it off, we can come down the hill in this direction as well as any other."

"That is right, Jeems," the Bean answered. "Very much so. But I think, if Red can make it up the hill—wait a minute—why not continue to pack him up?"

"Because, if the mad priests do not take care of their wounded and sick, it would draw attention to us that would be fatal."

Red got to his feet. "Listen to me, Jimmie Cordie. When I met ye in the Legion 'twas durin' a fight wid the black-hearted scuts av the Bat d'Af we was havin' in the café, wasn't it? It was. Ye fought by the side av me then. That's many long years ago and still we do be fightin' side by side. I ask ye to remember the while I ask ye this, all foolin' to wan side. Are ye goin' up that hill widout Red Dolan by the side av ye, weak though he is? I can still pull the trigger av me forty-five, and—"

Jimmie Cordie laughed. "Come right along, Mr. Dolan. I hope that trigger pulling will not be necessary. But get this—I want you to take it as easy as you can, at least until your strength comes back."

"I will, Jimmie darlin'. Come on."

"All right, we will. I'll say this, before we start. About that side by side thing. I've always been glad you were beside me, you big Irish, brick-topped wild man from Cork."

"The same to ye," Red answered happily as he fell in beside Jimmie.

CHAPTER VI.

INVASION.

THE ruins of the stone city covered a large space. There were piles of stone that once had been proud temples. Palaces half in ruins, street after street of what had once been stone houses, two stories high. Barracks, audience halls, warehouses, stone fountains from which there still gushed clear, cold water, squares and courtyards and artificial lakes and little ponds, all mixed together and, in a good many places, partly covered with vegetation. The whole place literally swarmed with mad priests. The captive pen was back of the palace used by the abbot, but the rescue party had no way of knowing that.

The priests were going here and there, sitting around campfires, stretched on the ground asleep, dancing in front of some old temple, on their knees shouting prayers; some

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were marching around and around in circles, others walking blindly, not caring who or what they bumped into, their eyes on the moon which was just beginning to come out from behind a cloud.

The mad priests they came close to paid no attention to them. The five soldiers of fortune walked with heads down, and, after the Yid said something, in the old prison lockstep, each man with his hand on the shoulder of the man ahead. His left hand. His right was ready to draw the deadly .45 Colt. Deadly in the hands of men who were all crack shots and unafraid. No more bow and arrow and sword work. From now on it would be shoot until they could shoot no more if they were discovered.

Jimmie Cordie led the parade and, as they got into the formation, said to George Grigsby, the man behind him, "Pass the word that we are going to circulate. If the showdown comes, back to back until we teach them to keep their distance."

Grigsby laughed. "That's the boy, Jimmie."

The lockstep idea of the Yid's was a grand success. It was a new kind of dance to the mad priests who happened to be looking that way when it started. After watching it for a moment or so, several of them at once formed parades of their own. Very soon there were long lines of the mad priests marching around in the lockstep. They started howling and yelling and after a moment or so Jimmie Cordie howled lustily and started a sort of a barbaric chant.

One by one the soldiers of fortune howled also and began to sing. They kept right on howling, only after the first, long drawn out howl they howled gibberish. Grigsby used the only tune he was familiar with, "My Old Kentucky Home." Red, behind Grigsby, used "The Wearing of the Green" for music and always claimed that the words were pure Celtic. The Boston Bean howled "John Brown's Body," as he claimed, in French. The Fighting Yid, not daring to sing in Hebrew, after the experience with the seven mad priests, gave vent very soulfully to "Dere is a happy land, far, far avay. Vere dey eat pork und beans three times a day. Oh! How de boarders yell, ven dey hear it de dinner bell —three times a day," and so on, in a special kind of pig-Latin. Whatever it all was, all together it made a volume of noise that sounded as if it must issue from very mad priests indeed.

JIMMIE CORDIE led the way through several of the buildings, winding in and out of the ruins, down streets and around ponds. His thought was to locate some place that looked as if it were being used as a prison or a place where a captive might be guarded. There were priests in all the buildings, some cooking, others eating and sleeping. But in no place was there any sign of a prisoner.

Grigsby, as they filed through a dark place near a wall, stopped howling long enough to say, "It may be, Jimmie, that they do not keep prisoners any longer than—it takes."

"I'm afraid of that, George. It must be getting darn near daylight. Comes the dawn—also comes us getting sunk. We haven't been in a third of the— There's a guard stationed by that door. See, over to the left. In front of that palace. We'll go over. If he tries to halt us, step behind him while I occupy his attention. I guess we can put him out before he squawks."

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"You take his attention, Jimmie. I'll see to it that he does not squawk."

The mad priest on guard watched the parade come up, indifferently.

When Jimmie got to within two feet of him, the mad priest stepped squarely in front of Jimmie, his sword drawn back for a thrust. He snarled something in a language Jimmie did not understand. Jimmie howled as if in a rage, then raised both arms high above his head. The mad priest snarled again and advanced his point an inch or so. Jimmie brought his left arm down and clenched his fist. Then he moved the fist slowly to the left, opening one finger at a time. It was an old trick, a very old one used in the West by gunmen to attract the eyes of a man facing them. It worked on the hill of the mad priests of the Kara-Kara sands. The mad priest's eyes followed the hand for a second. Long enough for Grigsby to step out of the line and get almost behind him. The mad priest sensed, rather than saw it, and turned. But it was too late. Grigsby's left arm was around the priest's throat and his right knee in the small of the priest's back.

"Close up, Red," Jimmie commanded calmly. "Cover George."

Red closed up, as did the Bean and the Yid, and then faced out. Between that living wall and the wall of the building a mad priest met his death.

"Push him over in the shadows," Jimmie said as Grigsby lowered the body to the ground. "That's far enough. We'll go in and see what he was guarding."

It was the place where Elizabeth Montague had faced the abbot. The chair he sat on was still on the dais and on the stand were the three jade fish. Near the dais were several of the mad priests—sound asleep.

Jimmie, the first one in, saw them and raised his hand for the howling to cease. The mad priests lay sprawled out in whatever position they were when sleep overcame them. It may have been drugs that put them to sleep or they may have been gorging themselves on food. Several pots half full of something were near them. Whatever the cause, the mad priests were asleep and most of them were snoring.

"Oi, Bean," the Yid said softly, "look at de jade fish. Dey is vorth somethink, I bet you."

"Well," the Bean answered, "put 'em in your pocket, Mr. Cohen."

"I vill do it dot little thing if de pocket of dis robe is big enough und Jimmie marches around de place."

"It doesn't look much like a place where prisoners are kept," Jimmie said. "Those fish are probably some sacred—"

"Jimmie, see that door beyant?" Red interrupted. "Maybeso she is in there, wid this guard and all out here."

"Yeah? Maybeso. I think the guard is for the fish — and some guarding they are doing at the moment. Well, we'll go and take a look. All doors look alike in this man's town."

THEY kept close to the wall, avoiding the sleeping mad priests, and got to the dais. The Yid said, "Vait a minute. I think I take it de jade fish along as a souvenir."

He climbed up on the dais and then started around the chair to get to the table.

"The ruling passion strong in death," Jimmie said with a grin.

The Yid had stooped and pulled something from under the chair. It was the Chinese boy who had translated for the abbot.

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The Yid had him by the ankle. The boy opened his mouth to shriek, but before he could draw breath and expel it, the Yid's other hand was over his mouth.

"Quiet," the Yid said sternly but softly.

A whisper carries farther than a low voice, and the Yid remembered it, but he did not remember to speak in anything else but English. He knew several Chinese words and commands, but in remembering one thing he forgot another.

"Hand him down here," Jimmie ordered. "He may know something."

The Yid handed him down to Grigsby and then went on about his business, which at the moment was to get himself a souvenir. The boy was too frightened to even try to yell now. He thought that some of the mad priests had him and were going to torture him. And yet—the mad priests who had pulled him out from under the chair had spoken an English word!

Jimmie Cordie motioned for Grigsby to carry the boy back of the dais, which was fairly long and wide. Once there, Jimmie put a finger to his lips as the boy looked at him, then ordered, "Take your hand away, George. He's all right."

The Yid had not taken his hand from the boy's mouth until Grigsby's hand was ready to substitute.

As Grigsby's hand fell away, Jimmie said, in Pushtu, "Do not be afraid, little brother. We are not going to hurt you."

The boy answered from Grigsby's arms, "I undelstand English. You—you ale not—"

"We are men who have come for one the mad priests hold captive, little brother. Do you—".

"I am also held captive. My father was a mighty, all-powelful war lold, and—and the mad pliests slew him and all his men and captuled me. I am the abbot's slave boy. Lescue me, please."

"All right, we will rescue you, also. But first we must rescue a maiden of the English. She was taken when the mad—"

"I know who you mean, mighty one. She is in the captive pen. Tomollow she is to dance on the led hot stones. Dance until she dies in honor of the thlee sacled fish."

"Where is the captive pen?"

"Back of this place. Behind that door the abbot lives, and if he heals us it will be vely bad for us. I sleep most of time under the chair, so that—"

"Tell us all about it later. Can you lead us to the captive pen or are you afraid to do it?"

The boy was intelligent and once his first fright was over and he found out the men who had him were not mad priests, he did not seem to be afraid.

"I am not aflaid. Mad pliests know I go evelywhele. The abbot send me all over. But—five men cannot enter the captive pen. Thele ale many gualds, and they ale not like those monglels who ale supposed to guald the sacled fish. They ale wide awake and—"

"You show us where it is; we'll attend to the guards. Are there guards all around the captive pen?"

"No, only at the gates. Walls all alound. Maybe some gualds on walls; I don't know."

"We'll find out. What is your name?"

"Li Tang."

"Put Li Tang down, George. Now, you walk beside me, Li Tang. Not to the gate of the captive pen, but to the part of the wall that is farthest away from— You understand me?"

"Sule, luler of the wolld. Plenty

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undelstand. I lived in Amelican family in Canchow for eight yeals."

"I see. Lead us, then. We will rescue you, also."

CHAPTER VII.

THE YID'S SACRIFICE.

ELIZABETH MONTAGUE lay asleep just outside her shack, her head pillowed on an arm. Her hand was under her, close to her breast. In it there was clutched the piece of iron band she had seen reflect the rays of the sun. She had worked it loose from the board that held it. The torn, sharp, jagged edge was ready to be drawn across her throat when the mad priests came for her.

She had not intended to go to sleep, but nature intended otherwise.

The moon had come out and it was fairly light, light enough to distinguish figures and faces. She stirred in her sleep as a light tap-tap-tap on her shoulder kept up. At last she opened her eyes and sat up. She saw the Chinese boy kneeling beside her, and as her arm tensed to flash the iron band to her throat she heard a calm voice say in English, "Steady, Montague. The guns have come."

"What? The guns have—" She turned and saw Jimmie Cordie, who had taken off his bonnet. "Who are you?" she asked, just as calmly.

"I am Jimmie Cordie, of the Big Swords, Miss Montague. May I suggest that we defer introductions until after we—"

"Mad pliests coming," warned Li Tang. "I can see them coming flom the gate."

"How many men have you here, Captain Cordie?"

"Four—five counting Li Tang, who is a very good man indeed."

"These priests may be coming for me. If they are, you are not to try to save me. Get back in—"

Jimmie Cordie laughed. "I'll bring up the guns, Miss Montague. Get back here in the shadows. They have turned to the right."

Elizabeth arose and smiled. "I am at your orders, Captain Cordie of the Big Swords."

"Well, those clothes you have on would give us away before we got fifty feet from the wall. Take this robe and bonnet. I'm dark, and—"

"I will take this Chinese boy's robe, cap and slippers. Is he to go with us?"

"Yes, Miss Montague, he is to go with us. But—what will he—"

"My shirt," interrupted Li Tang. "Many times I go alound in it or with nothing on. Mad pliests used to seeing me naked."

"Get behind Captain Cordie where it is dark and take them off. Drop them on the ground and then keep in the darkness until I have put them on. Hurry, boy."

As Li Tang slipped behind Jimmie Cordie, Elizabeth said, "Do you think there is any chance of our making it, Captain Cordie?"

"Well, it is on the knees of the Nine Red Gods. They allowed us to get to you. Maybeso they plan on allowing us to get out. Who knows?"

"You are a fatalist, captain? So am I—to a certain extent. I am—there is something I want to take with me. If the Red Gods plan to allow us to get out, it is of value. I will be back in a moment."

She had remembered the red leather case. It spoke a lot for her nerve, remembering a thing like that in the position she was in. Most women, and

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men also, would have thought only of escaping from the mad priests.

SHE went into the hovel and came out in a moment with the case tucked under her left arm. "Have you an extra gun?" she asked.

"No," answered Jimmie, amused at her courage. "Li Tang's outfit is ready, Miss Montague."

Two minutes or less went by, and then Elizabeth stepped from the darkness. She and the Chinese boy were about of the same size and, in the moonlight, if not too close, she did not look unlike him.

"Where is the case you went to get?" Jimmie asked. "Have you forgotten it?"

"No. I put it in the pocket of this robe. If you are ready, Captain Cordie."

"Quite ready," Jimmie answered with a grin. Now that they had found her, unhurt, his spirits had risen once more to their usual gay outlook. "Li Tang, there can't be two of you. If the mad priests see you walking with us and also see you prancing along with a shirt on, what then?"

"I do not know, lesplendent one. Vely selious matter. Vely. No can be two of me."

"Well, we'll make it to the wall and join the rest of the army. It may be we can make a black bonnet out of you as soon as we meet a mad priest who wears the regalia. You understand what regalia means?"

"No, war lold of all captains."

"I'll tell you some time. Right now, keep between the golden one and me and make yourself as small as possible."

Elizabeth Montague laughed, a gay, amused little laugh. "I have heard a great deal about you, Captain Cordie. Now I know it was not exaggerated. Is Major Grigsby and Red Dolan and —what is it he is called, the—".

"You mean the Boston Bean or the Fighting Yid?"

"Yes. Are they with you, as usual?"

"All of them. They are the army I referred to."

Again Elizabeth laughed. "Well, if Jimmie Cordie, the Fighting Yid, the Boston Bean, Red Dolan and George Grigsby cannot rescue me, who can?"

"You forget Li Tang, here. He is the one who told us where you were, then led us to the wall and had the nerve to climb over with me. He is now an honored member of the outfit, Miss Montague."

"If those Nine Red Gods of yours allow us to escape, I will see to it that he is— But what better reward could he have than to be one of Jimmie Cordie's outfit?"

"Very prettily put, Miss Montague. To the left a little. Isn't it here we came over, Li Tang?"

"Yes, light hele, luler of millions of swolds. But—we wele boosted up. How can we climb up by oulselves?"

"I'll show you. You climb up on my shoulders. You can reach the top with your hands. Can you pull yourself up?"

"Yes, vely easily. I am mole than stlong."

"I'll bet you are. After you get up, roll to the other side and jump down. Tell Major Grigsby to climb up on the wall with the Fighting Yid."

JIMMIE lifted Elizabeth up to where the Fighting Yid's hands could close on her slender wrists. The Yid's legs were held in a grip like steel by Grigsby.

Once the Yid had her, Elizabeth was

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on top of the wall in another second. Grigsby lowered the Yid a little and Jimmie Cordie landed beside her.

All four rolled to the other side and jumped down. "What have ye here?" Red demanded. "Where is—"

"Heads up!" shouted the Bean. "Here they come!" And as he shouted his .45 Colt began detonating.

A mad priest had been sleeping partly behind a bale of rotting hemp, close to the wall. The soldiers of fortune had not seen him, and he had neither seen nor heard them when they came up. But a short time later he woke up. He heard Red telling the Yid all about it—in English. Jimmie had warned both of them to keep still, and they had, for a little while.

Grigsby and the Bean were a little farther along the wall. The Yid said something to Red in a low tone. Something about it being duck soup for them, resting while Jimmie Cordie climbed walls. It was kidding, pure and simple; the Yid would have given his eye teeth to be with Jimmie in the captive pen. Red, his cuts hurting him and having a vivid recollection of the Yid's butting in on him when he was playing around with two mads priests, answered in English and just about three tones too loud.

The mad priest listened, puzzled at the language. Grigsby came up and warned Red, who calmed down. The mad priest lay where he was, watching now as well as listening. He saw Li Tang come over the wall and then saw two of the men climb up. How mad he was cannot be known. Anyway, he was sane enough to realize there was a rescue of some kind going on. Some of the mad priests would have yelled, drawn their sword and charged. This one didn't.

He eased back along the wall and made it to the nearest group of priests, some fifty or sixty. Then he pointed, snarled out something and began dancing up and down in a rage, looking for all the world like an angry chimpanzee. The other priests looked, howled, drew their swords or picked up lances and charged. As they had looked, Jimmie Cordie, Grigsby, the Yid and Elizabeth Montague jumped down from the wall.

Jimmie Cordie looked at them and laughed.

"The rest of the tale will be woe, pure and simple. Let 'em have it! Get in the middle, Montague. You too, Li Tang. Start off, Bean! You next, Yid! Get beside George, Red. I'll rear guard. Spread out a little. Right through and down the hill."

Grigsby smiled as he fired. It was plain to be seen that Jimmie Cordie was back at the old stand. He had found Elizabeth Montague alive and unharmed—and here was a fight to get into.

The heavy bullets sent the mad priests down as a ball send ninepins. They shot a path through the priests—for a little way. Not far. If they had machine guns they could not have shot their way off the hill. The mad priests of Kara-Kara were not afraid of guns or anything else. And there were a thousand times too many of them for any five men to go through.

Jimmie Cordie saw it and ran forward to the Bean. "No can do, Codfish. Head for that building on the left."

THE building was of stone, two stories high, with no windows and with a narrow doorway that would barely admit two slim men at a time. The roof had fallen in at one front corner.

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The soldiers of fortune won to it and in. There was no lull in the attack of the mad priests. No sooner had Jimmie Cordie gotten in than two mad priests appeared in the doorway. There was no door. Jimmie turned and shot them both down.

Two more appeared, to fall also. There was a lull while priests were dragging the dead out of the way. A lull, and then two more mad priests charged in, to die in the doorway. The bullets hit them in the face, not the body.

Jimmie Cordie and the Boston Bean held the doorway. The mad priests did not have the chance of a paper cat in the hot place. They came into sight —and bullets from two of the most deadly guns in the Orient met them.

Elizabeth Montague, Red Dolan, the Yid, Grigsby and Li Tang stood by the wall to the right of the doorway. The Yid, Red and Grigsby had their Colt .45s in hand. Elizabeth Montague looked at them and smiled. Dawn had come and, owing to the hole in the roof, it was fairly light in the stone building.

She smiled as she said, "It looks as if we are holed up, gentlemen."

"We are, alanna," answered Red Dolan. "But don't ye worry. The scuts will never take ye from us."

"You are Red Dolan, aren't you?"

"I am. And ye are the English girl that Jimmie was tellin' me about. What was the matter wid the Chinks that was along to guard ye? Could not they— Where are ye going, ye Yid beneath notice? Stay up wid the rest av us."

The Yid had looked up at the hole and then started along the wall. He halted as Red spoke, and grinned. "I am goink up dere und take a look, Mistaire Dolan."

"Up where? Are ye a monkey to climb up the wall? Stay here where ye belong."

"Vatch me und learn somethink, Irish loafer." The Yid jumped, caught the end of a protruding timber, swung himself up, caught another timber farther up and then got his fingers on the flat of a stone that was out of line. He drew his body up, let go one hand, reached up and got hold of the wall where it had once joined the roof. In another second he was head and shoulders out of the hole.

"Bravo, Yid!" called Elizabeth Montague, as if she were at a circus, applauding some clever acrobat.

"Come down from there," Red commanded. "Now I know ye are a monkey, ye—"

The Yid's head appeared. "Tell it to Jimmie dot de main squeeze is caming up. My, is he mad? He is foaming at de mouth und dancink around. Vait till I take it a look." The Yid's head disappeared for a minute, then showed once more. "He is telling de gang somethink. Now dey are all mad as anythink. Dey ain't payink any attention to us. Vait till I take it another look."

"What the hell—I beg the pardon av ye, darlin'—what do we care what the black hearted divils are doin'?" Red called up. "Come down off there, ye Hester Street polecat. Some one will put an arrow in the gullet av ye."

The Yid looked out, then his head appeared.

"Dey is all runnink to von of de buildings. Mit de main squeeze. Somethink is didink."

JIMMIE CORDIE could not hear the Yid very well and paid no attention. He was concentrating on the doorway as was the Boston Bean.

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As the Yid's head came into sight once more the attack ceased.

"Dey are in de building and all around outside it. If dey vasn't mad before, dey are now. Vait till I take it another— I bet you I know what dey is mad about!" He swung down to the dirt floor. "Jimmie, I have thought it of somethink."

"Yeah? Well, some one better think of something before our ammunition gives out. Take my place for a minute, George."

As Grigsby stepped up beside the Bean, Jimmie walked over to the Yid. "All right, Abie. Let's have it."

"You remember ven I took it the jade fish for a souvenir?"

"Yes."

"Vell—know vat dey are, I bet you?"

"I know they are jade fish. What else?"

"Dey are the most precious thing dey have got. Maybeso de fish is vot dey vorship, ain't it?"

"The Fighting Yid is right, Captain Cordie. The jade fish is their god," Elizabeth Montague said. "There is no question about that."

"Maybeso. Go ahead, Yid."

"Vell, I got it dem in my pocket. Here, vait." The Yid took the jade fish from the deep pocket of the black robe. "See dis, kidt?" to Li Tang. "Vot is dey?"

"Oh, my glacious goodness! The thlee sacled fish! The abbot will be mole than clazy now and so will the lest of them. The fish is what they wolship. It is the most sacled thing that—"

"All right, Li Tang. Tell it to us later. What is the idea, Yid?"

"Dis, Jimmie. From de vall I see it another vall I can jump to. From dere I can reach it a big palace und from dere to a pond und from dere to another vall und—"

"From Evers to Tinker to Chance. What of it?"

"Vell, I can go all around in de ruins, I bet you, from roof to roof und so on. Dis of it. I vill get back up dere, yell, und den ven dey look at me, hold up the fish und make it a face at dem. Den I vill jump from de vall on de next von. Vot vill dey do, I esk you?"

"You ask what they will do, Abie? They will let go all holds and chase you over the said walls and roofs and what nots."

"Sure dey vill, all of dem. I vill lead it dem avay across de ruins und vile I am didink it, you can all sneak it down de hill. Vat could be sveeter?"

"Nothing—for us. But a whole heck of a lot of things for you, Mr. Cohen. Did it ever occur to you that they might catch you?"

"Not for a long time dey von't. Den if dey do, vat do I care—you are down de hill mit Miss Montague, ain't it?"

"It is a chance, Abie," Jimmie answered slowly. "A bare, fighting chance. But—"

"Wait a minute, Jimmie," the Yid interrupted, and to the surprise of Elizabeth Montague he spoke perfect English. The soldiers of fortune knew he could, if he wanted to—and if, in his mind, the situation warranted. "There are no buts. I have seen you lead a forlorn hope. I have seen the Bean lead one. I have seen both George and Red. And once I saw a man we all loved hold a pass until he died so that we might win to safety. We left him because we had a woman to protect—as we have now. Am I unworthy, Jimmie?"

"No, Abie, you are not unworthy.

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We hold you now as we have held you always, our equal in every respect. You are our partner—I can't say more than that."

"And I," Elizabeth Montague said clearly, "think that you are a gallant gentleman."

"Vell, den," the Yid went back to his usual speech, "dot's plenty. Dere is no time to vaste, ain't it. Ve make it believe dot all de veepink on shoulders is did. Good-by und good luck."

"Abie," Red said. "Ye are not goin' to the death av ye like that, widout—widout—ye know I always loved ye, ye hook-nosed scut av the world."

"Und so did I you, Irish bummer. fell—here goes it nothink. Good-by, George und Beany. I vill be seeink you. Good-by, Jimmie. Und you—"

"Wait," commanded Elizabeth, as the Yid turned to the wall. She walked up to him, took his face between her two hands and kissed him squarely on the mouth. "There are few men, very few, that I have kissed, Yid. I am honored to number you among them in my memory."

"Oi, it is me dot is honored und happy." For once, the soldiers of fortune saw the Fighting Yid embarrassed and showing extreme pleasure at the same time. "Now I fly it over de valls. Von more like dot und I do de chasink, not de mad priests."

Elizabeth kissed the Yid again. "As you said to us—good-by and good luck."

The Yid smiled, jumped for the timber and made it to the top of the wall.

They could not see what he was doing, but they heard him yell. Right afterward they heard many yells that grew in volume. Then they saw the Yid's legs drawn up to the wall.

"He's gone," Red said. "The Yid —is gone from us. Many is the time I fussed at him and now—"

"Start that later. We may not last ten minutes ourself. Take a look out the door, Bean."

"It is clear to the left," the Bean reported, "for as far as I can see. The mad priests are all running toward— I see the Yid! He is on a roof making faces at them and jumping up and down. They are climbing after him and—he's disappeared."

"Get going," Jimmie commanded curtly. "You and the Bean, George. You next, Miss Montague. Beside her, Li Tang. Beside me, Red. Once more we will try that r i g h t through and down the hill thing."

THEY made it—off the hill first and then across the sand to the border. The Yid had done what he thought he could do. He put every mad priest on the hill that could walk or run to chasing him to rescue the three jade fish. Nothing else was of the slightest importance to them. If they had seen the party leave the stone house they would not have paid any attention. To them, the fish were all in all—and now in the hands of an enemy!

The journey across the sand was a nightmare. Red's wounds made him give out early, and the Bean and Grigsby carried him on a seat made by their hands on wrists, Red's arms around their necks.

Then Elizabeth Montague's feet gave out. She had taken off her riding boots to put on Li Tang's slippers at the captive pen and walked in them without a whimper until her feet were raw and bleeding. At last she sat down, saying with a laugh:

"Another casualty, gentlemen. I am afraid I can walk no farther."

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"Get on my back," Jimmie commanded, kneeling in front of her, his back to her.

"But, Captain Cordie, I am very heavy."

"No talkee—lidee pigaback, allee same, little girl."

Elizabeth was not very heavy, weighing around one hundred and twenty, but she was no little girl either. Jimmie Cordie stuck it, as did the Bean and Grigsby, but they were all more than glad to take frequent rests before the hills were reached. The soles of Li Tang's feet must have been like shoe leather, because he walked over the sand as if on a bedroom rug.

They cleared the sand just about twenty-four hours after they left the hill. Several times, parties of two and three mad priests were met, heading for the hill. The Bean and Grigsby put Red down and shot the mad priests as they would that many snakes. No mad priest that came close lived to tell about it.

As they stopped near the battlefield in the valley, five thousand Uryankhes Tartars led by Sahet Khan and Zagatai came out of the passes and over the mountain ridges.

Jimmie, thinking of the long chance of rescuing the Yid, signaled with a violence that brought the Tartars galloping toward him.

"In a few minutes," Jimmie Cordie said as he knelt so that Elizabeth Montague could get off his back, "you will have something much better to ride than old man Cordie's son Jimmie."

"I thank you, Jimmie. You also are a very gallant gentleman. I think I will tell you that I—I like you very much."

Jimmie Cordie honestly did not know whether the look in her lovely blue eyes and the tone of her voice rang true—or not. They told that she had fallen in love with him. And yet, Jimmie knew she was—Elizabeth Montague and...

He liked her for her courage and, not being blind, granted the fact that she was very easy on the eyes. But that was as far as it went with him. He realized that she might know that he had the red leather case and was trying to do what Red called "smooch" him.

"I think," he said with a grin, "that if you will honor me as you did the Yid, that will be more than sufficient, Miss Montague."

She looked at him steadily for a moment, then laughed. "It may be that I will—some day, Captain Cordie of the Big Swords. And now, I will take my red leather case, please."

"I am afraid I do not understand. You put it in the pocket of the robe you are wearing, did you not?"

"I did. And when I was rolling over and over on the wall of the captive pen it fell out. You, rolling over and over behind me, picked it up and put it in your pocket."

"Why, so I did. I had forgotten all about it."

"I will take it now."

"If it were yours, I would give it to you, Miss Montague. At that, you may have the case—but not what is in it."

"It is my turn to misunderstand," she said coldly.

"Well, let's see. A Chinese surveyor made some notes. Some Japs and Russians tried for them. The Japs won and rode away with the notes—which then became stolen notes. You held the Japs up and in turn—I will say confiscated the notes. Whether the mad priests took them away from you and tossed them aside as valueless, I don't know. You dropped them, and I found them.

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Question, to whom do the notes belong? If the old saying, 'finders keepers,' still is in force, they belong to me."

"You see fit to joke, Captain Cordie. I will take them, please."

SAHET KHAN rode up. The fierce, dour old Tartar Khan, who could, and did when necessity arose, lead twenty thousand Uryankhes into battle, greeted Jimmie Cordie, who had gone through the ceremony of "blood brother" with him. As soon as he could conclude the greetings, Jimmie asked that a small fire be hastily built. Sahet Khan did not know what Jimmie wanted the fire for, but ordered it built.

Elizabeth Montague stood as if carved out of stone while Jimmie Cordie fed the fire with the survey notes. After it was finished she asked, "Why did you do that, Captain Cordie? They would have been worth a million to either the Soviet or Japan."

"There will be no fighting in the Thian Shan or on either side between the Japanese and the Soviet as long as I can prevent it, Miss Montague. There are too many Manchu and Chinese cities that would be caught between the upper and the nether millstones. And in those cities there are many gentle little women and children."

"I see. As well as being a fatalist, you are also a sentimentalist. I see also that I—made a mistake, Captain Cordie."

"We all do, once in a while, Miss Montague. Now we will send you on your way with an escort of Uryankhes while we and Sahet Khan go to save the Yid or"—Jimmie's voice grew taut—"avenge him."

A howl that reminded the soldiers of fortune and Elizabeth Montague of the mad priests came from Red Dolan, who was very nearly all right again.

"E-e-e-e-e yah! Look, Jimmie! Look! 'Tis the Yid! Well, the beneath notice, monkey-faced suct av the world and Hester Street!"

It was the Fighting Yid, nonchalantly strolling up to them. Li Tang squeaked, "My glacious goodness! He has on the abbot's celemonial hat!"

It took some time, after the Yid arrived, to get Red calmed down enough so that the Yid could tell his story. Red patted him on the back, hugged him and did everything but what Elizabeth Montague had done.

The Yid fairly bubbled: "Sure dey chased it me. Over buildings, down vells, across de bottom of de lakes, up in de towers und all over. Ven I got it tired, I hid und rested My, it vos duck soup keepink avay from dem. Vonce in a vile I put it de fish in my pocket und pulled it de bonnet low und come out und helped dem hunt for me. I vos de chief climber und acrobat for a big—"

"Keep on the main line, Abie," Jimmie interrupted with a grin.

"I vill. Vell, ven night come I met it de abbot comink out of his room. He gave it me de hat for another souvenir."

"He gave it to ye, ye thief av all creation? Ye took it from him and well ye know it," Red stated.

"I did not, Irish bummer. Treat it me mit great respect. I am now de abbot of de mad priests. Git it me madder und I vill order dot you be skinned alive, red-headt. My, vot a lovely ceremony it vos ven dey made me de—"

"Made ye what? Ye are only a—"

"Save it until later, Red. Come clean, Mr. Cohen."

"Vell, if you put it dot vay, Jimmie. Maybeso de abbot und I had it a

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little wrestlink match. After it vos over he didn't need it de hat any more, so I put it in my pocket. Den, ven I got good und ready I snuck down de hill und here I am—at de end of a perfect day."

"Day and night, you mean," the Bean corrected. "Well, all's well that ends well. What now, Jeems, me good man? I suggest adjourning to our clothes and then to a spring where we can wash around the ears."

"Vait," the Yid ordered. "I vish to—" He took the three jade fish from his pocket and went up to Elizabeth Montague. As he held them out to her he said, "For a very beautiful lady to remember the Fighting Yid by. He has something of infinitely more value to remember her by."

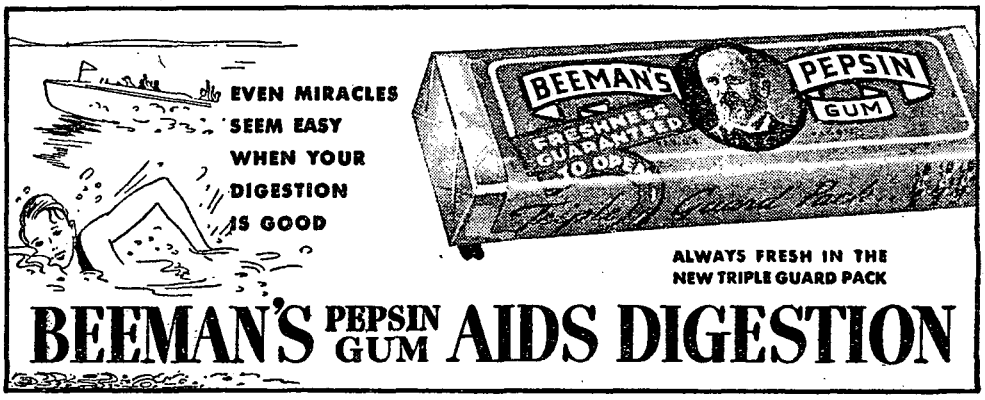
Elizabeth Montague took the jade fish in her hands. She knew that the three sacred fish of the mad priests of Kara-Kara were worth more to any museum or collector than the survey notes were to the Soviet or Japan, as far as selling for money was concerned.

"Why—why, thank you, Yid. I—it may be that some day I can—"

"Give it me another kiss," the Yid finished for her with a smirk. At that, they all laughed, Elizabeth Montague included.

"Now that everything is settled," Jimmie said, "let's be on our way."

THE END.



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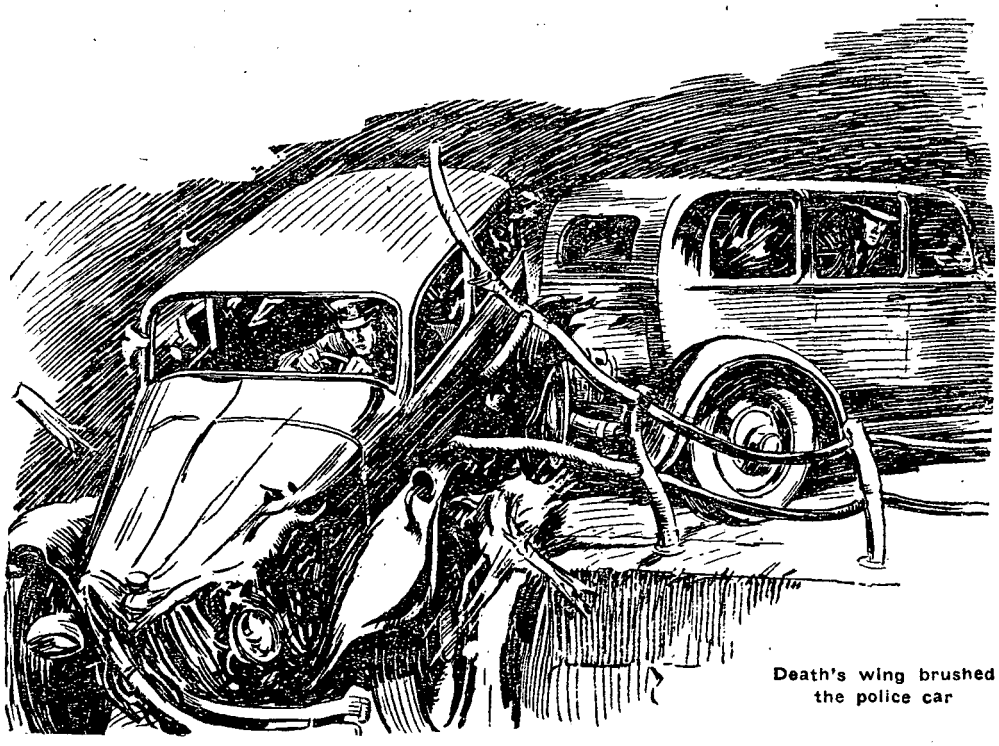

Death's wing brushed the police car

The Ledger of Life

By J. U. GIESY and JUNIUS B. SMITH

Authors of "The Green Goddess," "The Woolly Dog," etc.

Could the gifted sight of Semi-Dual, Persian mystic, penetrate the dark secrets of a blackmail and murder ring?

LEADING UP TO THIS INSTALLMENT

DETECTIVES Jim Bryce and Gordon Glace, and their assistant, Danny Quinn, first had their attention called to the case when two blackmail victims came to them for help. One of these victims was a broker named Jeff Hendricks; the other was a schoolgirl named Allison Martin, who belonged to a wealthy family. Both had been the marks of a blackmailer who was, seemingly, a woman—the broker because he had been deceiving his wife, and the Martin girl because she had been indiscreet enough to accept the attentions of Joe Palloni, a notorious gangster.

The case came out into the open when a woman was murdered, under mysterious circumstances, at the night club known as the Silver Moon, owned by Palloni. This woman was Margaret Kenton, one of a small party of people at the night club. At first glance, the death appeared to be suicide; but later that seemed extremely doubtful, even though the weapon used was a 38-caliber, silencer-equipped revolver which had belonged to her. Suspicion pointed, of course, to those nearest the dead woman at the time: Dick Torrance, a friend; a lawyer named Richfield who had once employed the dead woman; Gladys Ingham, a business associate; and Bob

This story began in the Argosy for June 30

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O'Niel, the Kenton woman's fiancé. Because of circumstantial evidence, O'Niel seemed to be the most logical suspect, though most of the others also had motives of some sort.

The matter became complicated when it was discovered that the Kenton woman had been engaged in blackmailing on an extensive scale. The notes demanding money from Hendricks and the Martin girl had been written on Miss Kenton's typewriter. And even Detective Inspector Johnson of the police force agreed that in some way Joe Palloni had been connected with her activities, probably through a gigolo-dancer known as Jumping Jack (his real name was Giovanni Cerra), employed at the Silver Moon. Jumping Jack was the man who had been observed to take the money from Hendricks.

To Detectives Bryce and Glace, however, the affair had so many mysterious angles that they felt constrained to ask help of their old friend, Semi-Dual, Persian mystic and astrologer who had often helped them in the past with difficult cases such as this.

CHAPTER VI.

IN THE EVENT OF DEATH.

"JUST what do you think Inspector Johnson might have said about you?" Bryce asked.

Gladys Ingham breathed deeply before she answered. "I don't know. But—about last night. Dick—I mean Mr. Torrance and I talked it over today at lunch—"

"Are you referring to the fact that Torrance wasn't with you when you discovered Miss Kenton dead?" I interrupted.

"Yes." Miss Ingham nodded.

"An' was your friend Torrance afraid that Johnson might think you gunned her yourself after you got back to your table?" asked Jim.

The woman paled before so direct an attack. Her lids half closed.

"It's—almost obvious, isn't it?" she finally said, and went on in a voice which g a i n e d by degrees in force. "There was opportunity enough, I suppose. But—I can't help how it looks. I didn't do it. I'm—just not that sort. God knows I had reason enough to hate her and the cold-blooded way in which she practically—bought Bob."

"Bought him?" I repeated, aware of an unpleasant reaction to her words. "Do you mean O'Niel didn't really love her?"

"No—I don't mean that," Miss Ingham returned. "That was the pity of it; he did. I've already told you he was simple-minded. What I mean is that if she hadn't been expecting a forture, she couldn't have planned a trip to Europe, and he might have had time to find out what she was."

"A blackmailin' biddy?" said Bryce.

Miss Ingham eyed him. "I don't know. Was she really?"

"Sure." Bryce made no effort at evasion.

The woman set her lips. "Then—she was even worse than I thought. Have you any proof? Something she'd written on one of her machines—or something you found in that drawer with the double bottom?"

"You're a bright girl." Jim smiled.

"Scarcely that, I'm afraid." Miss Ingham shook her head. "But I'm bright enough to know that Bob would never have looked at her twice if he'd suspected. And now you've told me how she was getting her money, I'm wondering if her story about an inheritance was true—or if she was expecting—"

"To get it by blackmail, eh?" Bryce grinned. "I've trifled with that thought myself."

"Yes, I suppose so." All at once the

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girl's voice seemed tired. "You've thought of pretty much everything. But if she was trying to get it by—extortion—might that it not explain—?"

"Five hundred grand is a lot of money," Bryce cut in.

Miss Ingham nodded. "I suppose so," she said. "I'm wasting your time. And I can't help what your friend the Inspector thinks. I didn't kill Marge. —But do what you can for Bob."

"We'll do all we can," I assured her. "And what we need now is all the information concerning Miss Kenton that we can obtain. If you worked for her and went to night clubs with her—"

'OH, but"—she cut me off, with a tinge of color in face and throat—"that was because of Bob. And I think she knew it, and asked me to go along because she knew it. She was cruel, Mr. Glace. She knew too many things. You know, she was once a court reporter and she picked up a lot of nasty tricks."

"We'll probably dig up the dirt on her as we go along," Bryce said.

Miss Ingham reverted to her former topic. "But what does Inspector Johnson think about me?"

"Nothin' definite," Jim countered bluntly. "Right now, we're gatherin' straws. We ain't ready to make bricks. —An' we never will be, unless we get to work." He drew out his watch in a pointed manner.

Miss Ingham took the hint. "Then I mustn't detain you. Good-afternoon, Mr. Glace."

"And that," Jim declared, when the door had closed behind her, "oughta put me in my place. It looks like Johnson has got that baby worried. And when they're worried is when they slip. But she sure hated Kenton!—Let's keep that date with Richfield."

O'Niel's attorney received us in a well-appointed room where a slender vase on a polished desk contained a single exquisite rose. There was an exquisiteness, too, in the iron gray hair brushed back from his colorless, well bred face and forehead; in the meticulous detail of his grooming, so complete as to barely escape a hint of foppishness.

But there was nothing of foppishness in the cold, blue glance he turned upon us.

"Really, gentlemen, I'm inclined to feel that you're wasting your time as well as mine," he said. "If, as you say, you are working for O'Niel, I shall coöperate, of course. But you must remember that I was Miss Kenton's friend rather than his; and I can think of little that will be of help to you in your investigations. May I ask you to be brief?"

"Brief as possible," I returned. "As it happens, it is about Miss Kenton we want to see you. As her former employer, have you ever heard or known of anything that might cause you to think of her as one who would practice blackmail?"

He frowned, and fiddled with a paper knife before he probed my purpose.

"Just what is behind that question, Mr. Glace?" he demanded.

I told him, and he listened without comment.

"I THINK you shock me," he said, when at length I paused. "Margaret was in my office for over two years, and I found her most efficient. I met her when she was a court reporter, on a case heard in chambers."

"Dirty?" Bryce asked.

Richfield gave him a glance.

"None too savory," he answered.

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"Are you suggesting that she may have obtained information which she later employed to her monetary gain, from such or similar sources?"

"Well—seein' that cases heard in chambers are often pretty juicy, maybe I was," Jim replied.

"I see." Richfield frowned again. "What I started to say, however, was that her work in this particular case attracted my attention, and that later I took her into my office."

"And why did she leave?" Jim inquired.

"Not that it concerns you, but her purpose was to organize her own business," Richfield returned, in a tone of what seemed to be annoyance.

"No other reason?" Bryce questioned, baldly.

"None," Richfield actually snapped. "But in case you retain any doubt, let me add that even after she left, I occasionally took to her bits of particular work, work of a technical nature.—Because of the fact that she understood as well my requirements."

"Did you know she intended to marry O'Niel?" Bryce asked.

"Certainly. She told me," Richfield assented, and went on: "To me, the whole—er—tragic occurrence smacks of the bizarre. She was alive, before the last dance, because I caught her eye and she acknowledged my salutation. Yet at the end of that dance, her life was blotted out.—And now comes this story of blackmail. Gentlemen, I am amazed! Did the police discover anything beyond the fact that the notes were written in her office?"

"Not that we've heard about," Bryce declared.

"And the machine falls short of conclusive evidence, of course."

"Meanin' that somebody else mighta used it?" Jim suggested. "It's her fingerprint that ties it up, of course."

Richfield narrowed his lids. "Yet one might think that if she were making a business of it, she might have left some other evidence."

"An' I ain't sayin' she didn't—or that some joker didn't beat us to it," Bryce rejoined.

"How do you mean?" Richfield's tone was startled.

Bryce explained concerning the drawer with the double bottom in the dead girl's rooms, and went on, "But there's just a chance that we've got a lead on that. At the Silver Moon there's a gig by the name of Giovanni Cerra. We think he was workin' with her. An' if he was, an' knew she was dead—"

"He might have entered her room before Johnson posted a guard," Richfield interrupted. "Is that it, Mr. Bryce?"

"Well," Jim grinned. "I don't reckon he did it afterwards."

For the third time, Richfield scowled.

"Margaret died at eleven-ten, or close to it," he said in the tone of a man who thinks aloud. "I left the Moon at a little after twelve. Yes—there would have been time, I imagine. —Why did Johnson lock the door after the horse was stolen?"

"There wasn't any reason to think there was a horse, at first," Bryce said a trifle stiffly. "Or that somebody'd search her flop the minute she was cooled. Who'd you have in mind, just now, when you said there might have been time."

SUDDENLY Richfield smiled. "You're a literal person, aren't you, Bryce? I had no one in mind, unless it was the man you mentioned, of course. I merely meant he could

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have done it between the time Margaret was shot and the time Johnson posted his guard."

"And that," I said, "would mean that whoever did it knew she was dead, or would be, and hence was either in the café or entered her rooms after she left them, with the advance knowledge that she wasn't coming back."

"Holy pickled herring!" Bryce exclaimed. "Remember what that Martin pullet told us Palloni said about that note? That may have been baloney—"

"Just a minute," Richfield stayed his outburst. "May I ask what you're talking about? Do you mean that Palloni, the—er—gangster?"

"Sure." Jim chuckled and explained at considerable length. "Honest, Mr. Richfield, we don't know anything, really. We're just gatherin' straws, in the hope that one of 'em may break some camel's back. Up to now, though, we've got darned few straws—'an' not a single camel, outside of O'Niel, an' he looks like a goat."

"And one of your 'suppositions,'" Richfield said, "is that Margaret may have run counter to some of this—er—gangster's plans?—You still feel that her death was murder?"

"Don't you?" said Jim.

"No." The lawyer shook his head. "Let us look at facts. She is killed with her own gun. It lay at her feet—and the cloth of her gown was scorched by the discharge. Furthermore, it appears, as I have learned to-day, that she had actually prepared for the eventuality of her death."

"What's that?" Bryce literally exploded, while I felt a chill sensation run down my back. "Prepared for it how, Mr. Richfield?"

"She had made a will," the lawyer said, with a faint smile twitching his mouth. "And although I have not as yet seen it, according to my client the document names him as heir to all her possessions at the time of her death."

CHAPTER VII.

DEATH'S WING.

AT another time, I might have laughed at Bryce. He not only stared; he gaped. And I found myself no less constrained to a startled silence by Richfield's words. I saw their possible implication. I recalled that Johnson had said a few hours before that had it been possible for O'Niel to obtain the money without the woman, he would be satisfied with his arrest. Now O'Neil was her heir!

"He—told you that when you was over to see him this morning?"

"Yes, Mr. Bryce." The lawyer's voice was precise. "And he gave me written authority to take charge of her affairs, in his behalf."

I shook myself together. "She made the will recently?" I asked.

"That is a pertinent question," Richfield replied. "And one which supports my view of the case. O'Niel says she executed the document three days ago, and placed it in a safety deposit box—which I will have opened after due formalities, of course. The knowledge surprised me, I confess. But she was madly in love, I imagine. Romance came late into her life. I have heard her laugh at the weaknesses and frailties it so often masks.

"She was an orphan—had made her own way unaided. I know that she made money through, as she claimed, investments. That is a claim which your suggestion of blackmail may possibly cloud. In either case, it appears that she wanted O'Niel to have whatever she left. As affecting O'Niel

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right now, the thing is rather a two-edged sword. But if we can establish his love for her in the minds of the jury, it will become a weapon in defense of his innocence. And if we show her engaged in blackmail, we shall be able to widen the field of suspicion."

"And when are you takin' charge of her affairs?" Jim asked.

"At once," Richfield told him. "I made arrangements for her burial this afternoon.—I shall also do what I can to free O'Niel from all suspicion."

For the first time I noted a surge of human emotion in his tone. Then it was gone, and he was the coldly analytical lawyer again.

"I expect to spend a part of this evening at her rooms, provided I can arrange the matter with the police."

"I reckon you can." Bryce grinned. "We were thinking of going through them ourselves. If you like, we'll take you along."

"I certainly would," Richfield accepted. "I'll meet you at the Willden at any time you name."

"Around eight," Jim suggested and rose.

And that was the situation, less than twenty-four hours after Margaret Kenton had been shot to death in the Silver Moon.

"WHEW!" Bryce broke into comment as we reached the street. "For just a minute after Richfield said that doll had left a will in O'Niel's favor, you coulda fanned me down with a feather. I'd sure like to know whether the Ingham twist knew anything about it."

"You're not suggesting that she may have thought she could win both the man and the money, are you?" I demanded.

"I ain't suggestin' nothin'," he returned. "I'm just huntin' straws.—Say, Hendricks's place is up here about a block. Let's drop in an' tell him he can stop worryin' about the widow. To-morrow you can drop the Martin kid a line to run in and get her note. I'll get it off Johnson to-night."

That Hendricks was relieved, no one could doubt.

"I knew the girl. We've done business for her," he said. "And I read about her death. But I never thought it had a bearing in my direction. Thanks, Jim. If you'll send me a bill, I'll see that you get a check."

"And now," Bryce proposed when we had left the broker's office, "let's get hold of Johnson and slip him the low-down while we eat."

Johnson, however, surprised us both when we had put him in possession of the facts.

"Now that I've got it, I don't know that I want it," he said in a well nigh musing tone. "The thing's infernally clever. It looks crazy—but it ain't. Anybody coulda plugged her an' dropped the gun an' walked off.

"Damn it, I wish I could hang it on Palloni. There's one guy I'd love to knock over! We've come to a helluva pass in this country, when a wolf like him can run at large. There ain't a doubt he'd have shoved her off if she got in his way. And I reckon he knew her racket, all right. But somehow it ain't like his work. He'd have been more apt to take her for a ride and dump her in the bushes.—As for the gig, we got a tail on him, of course."

"Too bad you didn't have one on him last night," said Bryce. "If you had, we might know what was in the drawer with the double bottom—"

"Yeah!" Johnson cut him short. "The next thing, you'll be suggestin'

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that the Jumpin' Jack is plannin' to carry on the business."

"And he might, at that," Jim agreed. "He's seen it work. I wonder if he slipped her Hendricks's five yards, before they gave her the works."

"It wasn't on her, after the shootin'." Johnson drew his watch. "If we're to meet that mouthpiece, let's get movin'. I got a car outside."

But though his words were casual, what followed was anything but that.

WE entered the police machine, and Johnson directed the chauffeur to the Willden. We shot away from the curb, and five minutes later we reached the foot of a curving viaduct—a roadway flung across a deep ravine, above a lower driveway that threaded the sylvan beauty of one of the city's parks. It was then that Death brushed us with his wing.

From the rear, a car came toward us—a dark car running without lights. In a roaring rush it was upon us, was veering toward us, forcing us to the side. I heard Johnson shout a raucous warning. And then came a grinding jar, the lurch of our machine to the ramming contact of the other, a sickening plunge, and a crash.

I heard the rail of the viaduct splinter with a rending metallic sound. I felt our car sag drunkenly on the edge of the abyss, then catch and hang there, the nose and the front wheels over, the rear still holding to the road, as it seemed to me then, by the weight of our bodies alone.

"God!" I heard Johnson gasp. Then he spoke to the chauffeur, bent forward over the wheel. "Jerry!—Hey, Jerry! You all right?"

No answer. The driver neither spoke nor moved. And the other car had fled away into the night.

Then, in the glow of the dash lamp, I saw a part of the viaduct railing, projecting in a twisted and sinister suggestion through the front of our machine. It had been driven through the chauffeur's body like a deadly spear, and I felt myself sicken at the sight.

"Hey — Jerry!" Johnson called again, and reached for the unconscious man.

The car tilted dizzily with his movement, and Bryce dragged him back.

"Sit still or you'll have us all over!" he admonished harshly. "They meant to put us over. Don't you get it?"

"Never mind that now," Johnson snarled. "We got to get Jerry off that wheel."

"Then let Gordon do it. He's married, an' we ain't," said Jim. "He can get out an' see what he can do, while we keep this bus balanced."

Even then, I felt an admiration for the man.

Johnson gave instant assent. "That's right, Glace. Get out and do what you can."

By that time, however, there was help at hand. Cars had come up and stopped at sight of our predicament. There were many hands. They steadied the car while we dragged Jerry out.

His face was covered with blood from a cut in his scalp which another piece of the rail had made when it tore through the front of our machine.

Johnson, quite himself again, took charge at once. He sent a volunteer to telephone for help, applied a first aid bandage to Jerry's head, and sent him off in another car. And then the three of us waited until a wrecking car and another police machine appeared.

Five minutes later, we were on our way to the Willden once more, and Bryce was speaking.

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"Well that's that, but if you ask me, I wouldn't care to try it again! And there's one thing certain—somebody knows a lot more about what we're doing than we do. They meant to put us over. I tell you, the thing was planned."

"Yeah, it was," said Johnson, and his tone was grim.

CHAPTER VIII.

CLUE CHASE.

THE Willden was little different from a hundred other buildings of its kind. We went in and finding no sign of Richfield, approached an elevator cage. On the seventh floor Johnson led the way to the door of a suite and rapped.

"Evenin', Hansen," he spoke to the man who opened, and paused at sight of Richfield seated beyond the guard. "Hello, Mr. Richfield," he said. "We're late, but somebody tried to ram us off the park viaduct just now, an' it all took time."

"No harm done, apparently." Richfield waved a hand. "Allow me to compliment you on the discipline of your man. When you didn't arrive, I waited awhile, and then came up. But he's played watch dog on me ever since."

"Mr. Richfield is taking charge, Hansen," Johnson said. "You can give him the key and report at the station."

"Okay, sir."

The policeman grinned and handed the key to the lawyer.

I glanced around. There was a living room, a bedroom, a kitchenette and a bath in the apartment.

Hansen went out, and Johnson glanced at the lawyer. "And now, if you like, I'll show you that drawer with the double bottom."

He entered the bedroom, and we followed.

"Here it is," he said, and stooped before an old fashioned highboy, to pull out the lower drawer. I saw that its contents were bits of intimate feminine apparel in a jumbled mass of color.

"Everything mussed up like this last night, or did you do it?" I suggested.

"Nope. They was just about like this," Johnson told me.

Everything else in the bedroom was in order. I nodded, went down on my knees, and began lifting out clinging bits of crêpe and silk and satin.

"What do you expect that to get you?" Johnson growled.

I shook my head and continued my examination. Bryce bent beside me. Richfield smoked on a chair.

Then I took up a bit of crêpe, and paused at sight of a small irregular hole, the edges of which were scorched!

"Maybe it's this," I said and held it up.

"Spark from a cigarette, most likely," Bryce volunteered a possible explanation.

"The girl smoke?" Johnson turned to Richfield.

"Oh, yes." The attorney nodded.

"Then I don't reckon it amounts to much," Johnson said. "She coulda done it any time she was sittin' around in the thing—say before goin' to bed, or while she was makin' up."

"Except that it hasn't been worn since it was burned," I pointed out.

"Huh?" Bryce caught at my meaning. "And that might mean it was burned while somebody smokin' a cigarette was goin' through this drawer.

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—Say, Mr. Richfield, what brand did Miss Kenton smoke?"

"Why, I don't know. Is it important?" Richfield appeared to be amused. "Would the brand make any difference in the hole?"

"Maybe not." Bryce frowned. "But there's an ash tray on a stand in the other room, an' it's full of butts."

JOHNSON chuckled. "And you was thinkin' whoever burned a hole in her undies mighta left whatever he was smokin'.—You always was a broadminded thinker, Jim. I don't reckon—"

"An' you wasn't asked to," Bryce cut him off. "*You* ain't found a thing except a double-bottomed drawer with nothing in it."

"Gentlemen — gentlemen!" Richfield interposed. "Must you quarrel over your clues? There were four people here last evening—possibly five. Assuming that each of them smoked, Mr. Bryce will probably find several different brands in that ash tray, if he cares to take a look while you complete your examination of the *empty* drawer."

"Okay." Johnson drew the drawer completely out of the highboy while Bryce left the room. "Here's what put us wise," he said, indicating a discrepancy between the actual depth and the position of the visible bottom. "Now wait."

He produced a pocket knife and pried up the carefully fitted upper layer of wood.

"And there you are! Empty as an unkept promise."

"Just so," Richfield agreed, rising. "And now let's see what Bryce has found."

Johnson grinned, and thrust the crumpled garments back into the drawer, shoving the latter into place before he walked to the bedroom door.

"What luck with the snipe hunt, Jim?" he asked.

Bryce stood beside a smoker's stand on which he had arranged the stubs of a number of cigarettes. "Two toasted, two ships of the desert, six of a satisfyin' nature, an'—one of this here now nonchalant sort," he returned. "There's lipstick on the first, an' on some of the third, but none on the others."

"And where was the—er—nonchalant one in position to the others?" Richfield asked.

"Why," Bryce said as he gave him a glance, "it was nonchalantly shoved down on top of the rest."

"And would that mean it might have been deposited last?" the attorney said.

"I reckon I getcha," Jim rejoined. "Did whoever burned that hole in that crêpe thing Glace discovered jam just that one stub into the tray before he left? He might have, at that, because you can see the end was rubbed some, to grind it out."

"And now all we gotta do is find somebody who nonchalantly grinds out that brand of smokes, to get our claws on the mug that went through this dump last night," Johnson grumbled. "Ain't *that* a lotta help?"

Richfield faced him in a manner of impatience.

"Almost, inspector. At last you have voiced an intelligent remark.—Four people were in this room. There is evidence that three other brands of cigarettes were smoked. Two bear stains of lipstick. We may assume that O'Niel and Miss Kenton smoked the same brand for—er—sentimental reasons; that Miss Ingham used the second paste-stained lot; and that

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Torrance smoked the others. Do you see the point?"

"I reckon O'Niel could tell you," Johnson replied, with none too good grace.

Richfield suddenly smiled. "Then suppose you find out.—And let's complete our work. If any one actually came here last night, I'd like to know why and who he was."

At the end, his smile was gone and his eyes were cold.

"You and us both," said Johnson. "Hop to it, boys!"

We finished our task. But not till I came to a spindle-legged writing desk with a folding top did we gain the least result. Then, from a pigeonhole, I drew a small morocco-bound memorandum book, and found it partly filled with columns of letters and numbers, connected by hyphens.

"Code, do you reckon?" Bryce suggested at my elbow.

"Pardon me, will you?"

Richfield took the book from my fingers, studied it through a minute of silence, and gave it back.

"It appears," he said, "to be but another example of how a man who for years has rubbed shoulders with every stripe and caliber of human nature may be deceived. Margaret Kenton has proved the most bitter surprise of my life. And each new development, as it occurs, but serves to reveal her as a person who missed very little which she could—er—capitalize."

CHAPTER IX.

THE DEBIT SIDE.

"THEN you know what it is?" Bryce spoke, referring to the book.

Richfield nodded. "In my estimation, it is no more than a record of legal cases. The letters and numbers serve to indicate the nature of the action."

"And it ought to be easy to prove," said Jim. "Any objection to our keeping it long enough to check up?"

"I'd be glad if you would," Richfield assented. "At present, she would appear to have invited her fate."

"Sort of gone into the red on the Ledger of Life, eh?" Jim made comment.

"Did O'Niel tell you anything specific concerning Miss Kenton's will?" I asked Richfield.

"Nothing specific," he returned. "Just why do you ask?"

"To discover the identity of the witness, or witnesses," I said.

"I see." He admitted the point. "But I understood that it was merely a line or two, naming him as heir, to act without bond. That is legal, so long as the will is entirely in her handwriting, and dated."

"And was it O'Niel's notion or hers?" Johnson growled.

"Hers, I imagine," Richfield told him. "O'Niel says he asked her why she wanted to draw it, and she merely laughed and said she wanted to feel sure that he would receive whatever was hers, in case anything happened to her."

"But that's *his* story," Johnson scowled.

Richfield's thin lips twitched. "I quite understand the several aspects of the matter, inspector. But if true, the statement would prove that her death, whether self-inflicted or not, was less a surprise to her than to any one else."

"You still pullin' the suicide line?" Johnson grumbled.

"Oh—I'm not pulling any line." Richfield shrugged. "But assuming

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that she was contemplating self-destruction, her actions were logical enough."

"Was they?" Johnson rasped. "She was expectin' to get a fortune an' marry O'Niel an' go to Europe."

"Speakin' of safety deposit boxes, maybe she kept her social dirt in one of them. Have you looked into that, Mr. Richfield?" Bryce interrupted.

"Not as yet." Richfield shook his head. "But assuming that these rooms were entered last evening, did you or did you not check up with the employees, inspector?"

"I did," Johnson responded gruffly. "I pulled all the kindergarten stuff. And there ain't any fingerprints, either. Let's get outa here. Bring your snipes if you want to, Bryce.

"And to-morrow," he said when Richfield had driven away in his car and we were on our way back to the station, "you two check up on that book Glace found. This dame knew she was in some sort of danger.—How'd you put it, Bryce?"

His brows were knitted in the effort to recall.

"GONE into the red on the Ledger of Life, d'ye mean?" Jim said. "Semi-Dual pulled that to-day. You know, he thinks everything a man does adds up like a column of figures."

"Uh-huh," Johnson grunted. "An' I don't know but he's right. In my time, I've seen enough to make it practically certain that there's some sort of Bookkeeper on the job, and a mighty efficient one, too. By the way, I checked up on what Torrance said about speakin' to a guy at the Moon, while the Ingham girl went back to their table, an' it's straight. I tell you, this thing's deep.

"Take to-night. Somebody tried to gang us; but we're here right now—just because they didn't hit us quite hard enough. An' *why* didn't they hit us as hard as they meant? Maybe Dual could tell us. Anyway, I'd like to know what he says."

"Well, then, let's go up now and see him," said Bryce. "It ain't so late."

Johnson gave the order. The car swerved, and presently came to a stand before the entrance to the Urania. We went in and took the elevator.

Dual's garden lay in shadow, when we reached it, soundless save for the splash of the tiny fountain, and lightless save for a yellow gleam in a window to tell us he was still awake. The tower chimes rang softly, and the tower door swung open and Henri bowed.

"You come quickly, again," he said. "But the Master does not sleep."

He bowed again, deferentially.

From the door beyond him, Dual spoke.

"Enter, my friends, and bring me the fruits of your searching."

We entered the room where the mellow light from the hand of the bronze Venus was cast on the desk in front of which he sat, with a mass of symbol-marked papers before him, the sign manual of his work.

"Frankly," I said as we seated ourselves, "I don't know whether we bring you wheat or chaff. But you, I hope, have learned something."

"Of which," he returned, "I hold no proof save in the intangible indications thrown off by the Wheel in its turning, which with the man of to-day have small weight. Tell me, therefore, of your striving—if perchance we may thereby establish my less material findings, on a basis of determined fact."

I complied, and when I had finished,

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he sat for a time as a judge might sit to review a mass of evidence.

"DEATH passed close to you, my friends," he said at last. "But it was not written, as I knew, who have erected the charts of your lives in the past. For the rest, we are faced by a double triad—in this matter—the first being Mercury, Saturn and Neptune; the second Saturn, Mercury and Mars. A damnable quality appears. Neptune I see as Margaret Kenton, a woman dragged down, degraded, destroyed in a trap of her own contriving.

"Neptune normally rules the higher aspects of that which men call love. But Neptune, deprived of its normal octave of expression, may sink to abysmal depths. What you tell me of this woman is enough. She scoffed at love, and we have reason to feel that she dealt of deliberate purpose in its frankly animal phases of expression—to a sordid enrichment of herself.

"Yet, as in sex, there are ever dual factors, so there is a dual quality in the scheme of the Universe. Male and female, positive and negative, are but names for the two opposing forces through which that Universe exists. And therein was she tricked. Enriched by unclean knowledge, she in the end became the victim of the thing she had defiled."

"Meanin' she fell in love with O'Niel?" said Bryce.

"O'Niel, as I see it," said Semi-Dual, "was her downfall, and her God. Love, when it came to her at last, left her naked in her own eyes. She became afraid, I think, that he might discover her sordid story, and she sought a way of escape."

"By draggin' him off to Europe," Johnson suggested.

"Possibly," Dual replied. "She was secretive by nature. She had sold silence for a price. She was coldly calculating, and selfish. While Neptune appears to have prostituted her talents to a crafty seeking of material advantage, Mars shows in my horary figure as a selfish person."

"Her an' the Jumpin' Jack—" Jim began.

"Giovanni Cerra?" Dual checked him. "But Cerra, my friend, has wings on his feet, in the figure I have erected—Mercury, you know, was the messenger of the gods, and wore wings on his feet."

"Messenger, huh?" Bryce grinned. "Well, that ain't so bad. He picked up Hendricks's five yards—"

"Messenger of the gods," Semi-Dual corrected. "Their mills grind slowly exceeding fine. Perchance he will serve them yet, in the matter of their grist!"

HIS eyes met mine, and I found them flecked with those tiny points of light, as though his soul looked out of a window. And as always when I saw them, they gave me the impression of a purpose as implacable as fate—of an unemotional knowledge based on the interplay of the unescapable forces which shuttle endlessly to and fro between the stars. Life, Death—what did they matter, I thought. I quoted Omar aloud.

"We are no other than a moving row
Of Magic Shadow-shapes that come and go
Round with the Sun-illumined Lantern held
In Midnight by the Master of the Show."

"Aye!" Once more Dual smiled.

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Johnson cleared his throat.

"But what about Cerra?" he questioned.

"Cerra," said Semi-Dual, "should be watched. I would like a more intimate knowledge of him. Is he of American or foreign birth? If the latter, the records should give us information as to his birth date, which I could use."

"If the records show, I'll get it for you," Johnson promised. "An' I got a question I wanta ask you flat. Was I right in pinchin' O'Niel or not?"

His query surprised me. He should have known better, I thought. Dual was not one to voice so definite an opinion, unless prepared to back it with proof. Even so, the point now so directly presented to him seemed difficult to evade. I saw Bryce purse his lips as we waited for the answer. It came:

"Eminently right, inspector. For by it you have knit the threads of the matter together; have brought justice into the equation, and directed the light of the sun upon the problem to the end that justice shall be served."

The words were characteristic of the man in the white and purple robes—as cryptic as he was wont to be until he was ready to speak.

Jim caught at its tag in characteristic fashion.

"The sun, huh? Just where does the sun come into this muddle?"

"As the symbol of the force and power of justice," Dual returned. "Hence the forces of law and order—the police—may stand for us who are allied with them to a common purpose in our ultimate success."

"Ultimate?" said Jim. "That sounds as though you were seein' a lot more to it than we do yet."

Dual made no immediate response. He merely sat at the desk whereon were the symbol-marked sheets from which he read the marches of the stars. But to me it seemed that knowledge sat there with him—as sure yet as remote as the pin-points of light that wheeled above us.

"And if I should tell you I felt assured of far more than I have said?" he returned at length.

"I'd believe you," Bryce declared, without hesitation.

For the third time, Dual smiled.

"Aye," he agreed. "One believes a thing he has oft seen proved. Today I said I would seek a balance in the Cosmic Ledger. That balance I have struck, and in it a debtor to Life stands forth. And if a debt there be, that debt shall be paid in one way or another. So, and so only, is the Cosmic Balance kept. There is nothing of chance in the equation.

"Observe how the progression moves. A woman is killed with an explosive weapon. A man goes to jail with explosive suddenness. We have in our possession a possible motive for the woman's death. Is this an accident? Nay. It is simply cause and effect; it is the grinding of the Mill, my friends.—Go, then, with that assurance, and bring to the Mill whatever you find of—grist." . . .

"Back from the stars to Earth," Jim remarked as we left the Urania entrance. "I'm takin' my own advice an' huntin' a bed."

I found my car and dropped him at his quarters and drove home.

QUINN barged into my office at ten o'clock, the next morning, and flopped himself into a chair.

"Get Mr. Jim in here, willya?" he said, an undisguised eagerness in face and voice.

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I pressed a buzzer that brought Bryce to us.

"And now what have you stubbed your toe on?" I prompted.

Danny grinned. "Why, I know what became of the long end of Hendricks's five yards. The Jumpin' Jack blew it on a ring for that li'l blond broad of his."

"BEHAVE, behave," said Jim, with suddenly narrowed lids. "How do you know he did?"

"Why, you see it was like this," Dan told him. "After I spoke of checkin' up on that rat, I got to thinkin' I might as well get busy right off the bat. So I ankled down to his flop in the afternoon an' hung around. The very first crack, I bump into a dick I know.

"'Hello,' I says. 'Whatcha doin'?' An' he says, 'Tailing a gorilla Johnson wanted watched.' I asks him who, an' blessed if he didn't say the Jumpin' Jack. So I asks is he in his flop, an' this guy says he is. So we hung around, and after a bit here comes the rat an' his floosie. An' they walk down to Goldberg's an' go inside."

"The jewelers?" said Bryce.

"Sure." Dan nodded. "I tell Carrigan to wait, an' I ankle past. I see 'em inside; so I go back, an' it ain't long till they come out. The moll's got her left glove off an' is lookin' at her finger, smilin' at the rat. That was just before six. I tell Carrigan to tail 'em, an' I go in the store an' ask if they've sold this girl a ring, an' they say they have. They say the rat paid for it with four one-hundred-dollar bills.

"That sounds hot to me, an' I get the serial numbers. Then this mornin' I go down an' ask Hendricks to let me check 'em. An' that cinched it. The gig never even turned 'em over to the Kenton doll. What he does is blow four of 'em on a bit of ice. I go back an' pick up Carrigan, near the Moon, an' he says the gig an' the doll have gone inside. So I blow in an' the Jack an' his doll are eatin' at a table, an' I get chummy with a cigarette girl.

"'Ain't that the kid what leads the show, over there at the Moon with the Jumpin' Jack?' I asks, an' she says, 'Sure.'—'What's her name?' I says. 'Well,' she tells me, 'she calls herself Violet deLisle, but her real name's Maud Slade.'—'You love her, don't you?' I says. 'Like carbolic acid,' she pipes. 'But the Jack falls for her, all right. He's been promisin' her a ring for at least six months; an' believe it or not, to-day he makes good with a two-carat hunk of ice.'

"'Where'd a gig get all that money?' I asks her. She gives her lips a sort of free-wheelin' motion. 'Oh, there's a lot of these fat mammas who like their papas young an' slender,' she says. 'Say—I ain't one of the entertainers. Do you want some cigarettes or not?'—So I buy a pack, an'—that's all, I guess, except that the gig can't be hep to the fact he's bein' tailed, or he'd never have fed those bills to Goldberg, less'n two days after the Kenton twist was cooled."

Dan grinned.

Jim nodded. "Good work, young sleuth," he declared. "Now beat it. Glace an' I are about due to check out."

"Dictate a letter to the Martin baby, an' we'll go look up the numbers in that book you found," he urged when Dan had vanished. "Gimme a buzz when you're ready."

I followed his suggestion, ordered the letter mailed to the sorority house

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which Miss Martin had given as her address, and put on my hat.

AT the court house, a clerk was placed at our disposal, and inside a very few minutes we were assured that Richfield's theory concerning the book had been correct.

There followed the slower but necessary work of checking our list and gaining an insight into the nature of the specific cases to which the notations applied.

Here our clerk displayed an interest he made no effort to disguise. But that was not surprising. Margaret Kenton had been a court reporter, and her dramatic death had set official tongues abuzz.

"A shocking thing, Miss Kenton's death," he said.

"Yeah. But what makes you say so?" Bryce inquired.

"Because I can't help wondering if there is any connection between it and the cases she reported, Mr. Bryce," the fellow smiled.

"Meanin' she reported these?" Jim asked.

"All of them, unless I'm mistaken. Most of them were reported in chambers, if you'll notice. She did a lot of that sort of work.

"She was a regular go-getter. Ran a business of her own, and was secretary of the Realty Investment Corporation."

"Yeah?" Save for a narrowing of his lids, Bryce gave no sign that the information concerning Miss Kenton's past activities had aroused his interest.

"Yes," the clerk assented, nodding. "She was a mighty intelligent woman. Her company did a good business, too. One of their stunts was buying up ground that had to be sold in settling up an estate. They did a lot of that till the bottom fell out of real estate. Since then, they haven't done so well. But who has?"

"If you're askin' me, I don't know," Bryce said. "And I never heard of that company in my life. Who was behind it?"

"Why—I don't know." The clerk eyed him. "Their papers are on file, if you'd like to see them."

"Sure," Jim accepted. "Let's give 'em a slant."

"There's just a chance," he said, when the clerk had moved away.

"Of what?" I questioned.

"Another racket," he scowled. "Buyin' up parcels of real estate. That dame useta know the value of every kind of dirt.—See if this realty corporation wasn't just her an' a bunch of dummy directors."

Seemingly, his guess was right. Because when the articles of incorporation were laid before us they showed the names of one man, and three women besides Miss Kenton, under a date now four years past.

"Four hens an' a rooster," my partner grinned. "Who was the Jonathan Dobbie who was scratchin' with all these clucks?"

The man nodded wisely.

"I wouldn't wonder if he was the guy who put up the money," the clerk replied. "He's a professional bondsman."

"Bondsman!" Bryce exclaimed. "You mean Johhny Dobbie? Well, I'll be a so-and-so! An' he was president of this here realty investment aggregation. I begin to see a light! Yep. She probably got to know him when she was a court reporter. He might be just the lad to make money out of real estate."

"How do you mean—he might be?" the county employée questioned.

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I read a puzzled conjecture in his eyes.

BUT Bryce took a leaf from Dual's book. "I don't know, son. I reckon I was just thinkin' out loud. So—these folks used to handle land that was part of estates?"

"Yes."

The clerk's tone was suddenly guarded. He impressed me as feeling that he had probably said too much.

"And that would mean that land would have to be appraised," Jim considered.

"Yes, but hold on." Our companion's manner was startled. "You don't mean that those appraisements might have been inspired?"

Bryce grinned again. "Inspired is a far-reachin' word. But since you've been inspired to use it, you might follow those transactions through the recorder's office and let us pay you for the work. I'm curious myself. You may find that a lot of the transfers are for 'one dollar and other considerations,' without any indication as to what the other considerations were. Still, hop to it if you care to."

We completed our check on the list, in each case setting the names of the principals against its number. And with the final result in Jim's pocket, we thanked the clerk for his assistance and left.

"Do you really think Dobbie may have arranged for appraisements low enough to guarantee a profit on any reasonable turn over?" I asked, when we again were in my car.

Jim frowned. "The only objection to it is that there's more than one appraiser," he said. "The question is, could he have lined 'em up on that sort of a deal without somebody lettin' out a squawk? Of course we don't know that there really was any crooked work. It's just that I don't expect a smell of roses when I'm messin' around a skunk. We'd better put Johnson wise to this list, and on what Dan hung on the gig. But let's go to the office first."

AND so it was that we found the communication devised by pasting together words and letters clipped from the daily papers. The envelope containing it lay upon my desk, flaunting a special delivery stamp and a typed address, but no return destination.

I slit the heavy manilla, and drew from it a sheet of paper folded around five one-hundred-dollar notes!

Holding them somewhat gingerly, I read the message pasted on the inner side of the wrapping paper.

USE THIS TO HELP O'NIEL. MARGARET KENTON GOT WHAT SHE DESERVED. BUT I DON'T WANT AN INNOCENT MAN TO FRY FOR MY JOB.

Bryce says I gasped. Possibly I did. Because if the thing meant anything at all, those last two words must mean that Margaret Kenton's murderer knew we were working in O'Niel's behalf. It was a taunt, a challenge. It was like a slap in the face.—And five one-hundred-dollar bills! — Hendricks had paid five hundred dollars for silence. But what, then, of Dan's story concerning the purchase of a ring with bills of the proper serial numbers?

"Say, snap out of it, willya? What you got there?"

Jim's voice sounded gruffly in my ears, and I literally thrust the pasted missive into his hands and waited while he read it. And then I spread the currency fanwise before his eyes.

"Five hundred," I said. "In hundred-dollar bills!"

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A slow grin tugged at his lips.

"A plant, old son," he decided. "Just a plant. Whoever sent 'em wasn't wise to the fact that we knew that the gig had spent the originals. Where was this thing mailed?"

I glanced at the postmark on the cover. It was that of a small town some thirty miles away, and the mailing date was that of the day before. I told him, and he grinned again.

"Clever—damned clever!" he said. "But just a little too late, unless the Ingham cutie sent it."

"Ingham—?" I began.

The shrill of the telephone cut me off. I grabbed it, answered, stood with the receiver jammed to my ear while a voice barked at me, goaded me afresh with the information it conveyed.

"No, I don't," I said when at length it ceased. "I wrote her this morning. We'll be over as quickly as we can make it."

I slid the receiver back on its cradle. I was baffled and confused.

"That was Johnson," I said. "He's asking about Miss Martin. He's had a call from her sorority house. They say she went out last night and hasn't been heard of since."

"Palloni!" Bryce erupted the word, and struck the desk with his fist. "Palloni for a thousand!—Let's get goin'! Here's one time a woman didn't talk too much. Only, that big shot didn't know it when he grabbed her."

CHAPTER X.

A SNATCHING.

"GET Palloni," he urged in the detectives' room at the station. "Get that lousy bum an' sweat him! Slip him the news that for once he's put the finger on himself."

"Yeah," Johnson nodded, scowling. "I reckon he's engineered a snatch. The girl's rich, an' she probably let him know it, the same as she did you—the little cluck. The girl who called me said somebody telephoned the Martin frill, last evenin', an' pretty soon a car drove up an' took her off. One way an' another, Joe's made money out of women."

"The rat!" Bryce growled.

"Sure." Johnson nodded again. "I don't reckon he's got her in any place he owns, though.

"If he really is back of her disappearance, he's probably got her in some other hide out. But I'm havin' him brought in.—Put me wise to what you've done."

We told him, and I gave him the pasted-together letter. He read it and punched a button.

"Have this examined for prints," he directed the orderly who answered, and waited until the man was gone.

"Funny thing about that is—it fits," he said with a humorless grin. "I stuck a tail on the Ingham cutie, and last night she an' Torrance drive over to where this was mailed. They stop at a drug store, an' then come home again. That redhead has been tryin' to sell us the notion that O'Niel is innocent, an' this thing is just about as fancy a bit of work as a woman might cook up. So, outside the money, it's simply a hunk of mud in your eye."

"I thought of Ingham," Bryce rejoined. "She knows Richfield, an' a clever mouthpiece might shake the thing under the nose of a jury."

He paused at the sound of a rap on the door.

"Come in!" Johnson bawled.

Palloni entered the room, a lowering expression on his features.

"Say," he demanded, helping him-

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self to a chair, "what's the idear of sendin' a prowl car for me. I got a car of my own."

"An' what was it doin' last night?" Johnson rumbled. "Where was it, between say nine o'clock an' whatever time you got home?"

The glances of the two men crossed. Palloni reminded me of a dangerous beast—a product of modern times so crassly careless men of his type were permitted to exist. On the other hand, Johnson gave the impression of a man with his moral feet on a firmer ground.

Palloni shrugged.

"It was waitin' for me outside the Moon. But what the hell!"

"You're dead sure it was waitin', Joe?" Johnson asked.

"Say," the gangster breathed deeply. "What's eatin' you this mornin'? Come on! What's it all about?"

"Okay," Johnson rasped. "I'm asking you if it was waitin', because Allison Martin was snatched last night?"

"An' who in hell is Allison Martin?" Not a muscle twitched in Palloni's face.

BUT Johnson merely nodded.

"Pretty good, Joe—but not good enough. You know the kid, all right. She's played around with you a lot.

"This time you picked a hot one, Joe. That cutie's dynamite. An' in snatchin' her last night, you've put the finger on yourself. Ain't *that* a laugh?"

"I don't getcha. I don't getcha at all." Palloni leaned a trifle forward, with slitted lids.

Johnson smiled. "Wise to the Kenton dame's racket, wasn't you, Joe?"

"Wait a minute," Palloni protested. "What's that got to do with this kid's bein' snatched?"

"Why," Johnson said, "Kenton wrote the Martin twist a letter demandin' kale to keep her from tellin' her guardian about her playin' around with you. Quit stallin', Joe. Your back's against the ropes. The Martin girl showed that note to you, and—what you ain't hep to yet—she showed it to Glace and Bryce here, and told 'em what you said about puttin' the heat on Kenton, if she muscled in on your prowl. Then the Kenton twist is gunned, an' last night the Martin kid disappears. Careless work, Joe! You're losing your fine hand!"

Palloni's color faded. His skin was like dirty wax. I saw that he was afraid, like so many of his ilk when faced by danger to themselves. All at once his forehead was beaded by tiny drops of sweat.

Yet he managed another shrug.

"Maybe I ain't the only one who's careless," he snarled. "Or maybe you're tired of your job. Try puttin' the heat on me, if you think it's healthy. There's people will put you back on a beat in the sticks, if I say the word, or if it'd suit you better, they'll kick you off the force. Who in hell are you, to treat me like a bum an' sweat me? I ain't got no reason to be afraid of the police."

"And still, you are, Joe." Johnson's voice was unruffled, cold.

"Says you!" the gangster sneered. "Listen, you cheap cop. The tail don't wag the dog. It's the head does that, an' I own it—I own it! Do you get me?"

"Why, yes, Joe," Johnson nodded. "I happen to know that you and your dirty money are hand in glove with every sort of law enforcement, from cops to courts. If it wasn't for that, you'd have been where you belong before this—you and every yellow dog of a crook that's been playin' hell with the country, the last few years.

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"But listen, mug, I may be a cheap cop, but I ain't cheap enough for you or your money to frighten me or buy me. There's still a few people who believe in decency and straight 'shootin'. I ain't fool enough to expect the tail to wag the dog. But I've heard of the dog's head bein'—cut off."

"Oh, blah!" the gangster challenged. "You can't hang anything on me. I didn't have the Kenton twist knocked off. Try goin' any further with this an'—I'll show you."

"Yeah. An' meanwhile, I'll hold you, Joe," Johnson said.

"*Hold me!*" Palloni's jaw sagged. "Say—have you gone clean off your nut? My mouthpiece will spring me so quick it will make you dizzy. You ain't got nothin' to hold me for!"

"EXCEPT murder, Joe." Johnson's voice was actually soft. I admired his self-control. All the mobsman's bluster backed by official crookedness as we knew, had failed to move him. It was Palloni who again reacted to the quietly spoken words.

"Murder?—By God, Johnson, you try to hang that girl's croakin' on me an' I'll—"

"Listen, Joe. You talk too much. Maybe you know it; maybe that's the real reason the Martin kid was snatched. She'd heard you threaten Kenton. But if anything happens to her—if she ain't back here mighty sudden—that murder charge is apt to double up. Think I don't know who's takin' your money, big boy? Well, I do—an' I got a lot of evidence. Right now, I got a coupla witnesses to the fact that you say you own the head of this department.—Hang anything on you, Joe? Why, all I got to do is let you talk, an' hang yourself."

Palloni blinked and shook his head, like a fighter shaken by a staggering punch. "But look," he said, in almost whining fashion. "There ain't no sense in this. Let's you an' me get together. I don't know a thing about this snatchin', but if it would help, I might find out. If this Martin frail was to show up—"

"*If,*" Johnson cut in sharply. "You mean *when,* don't you, Joe? If I hold you until she does—"

"You damned fool!" Palloni's tone was hoarse. "I told you I'd walk out on a writ, if you tried it."

"Yeah. I heard you," Johnson agreed. "But thanks for the tip. When you do, I'll arrest you for murder. An' if they spring you on that, I'll think of a lot of things you've pulled in the past. Looks like your mouthpiece might have to earn his money for a day or two, Joe. Let's get goin'. You're under arrest. Now—" He reached for the telephone. "Do you want to call your lawyer?"

"Yeah." Palloni moved to the desk.

"Outside call," Johnson spoke to the switch, and extended the receiver.

Palloni caught it from him and called a number.

"This is Joe Palloni. I gotta talk to Richfield. It's important."

Johnson's expression was blank. I met Jim's eyes, and no doubt he grinned at what he read in my face. Because here was Palloni, overlord of the underworld, speaking to Richfield with a commanding tongue.

Then he was thrusting the receiver into Johnson's hand, growling:

"Here—he'll talk to you himself."

JOHNSON was adjusting the instrument to his ear.

"Hello, Richfield," he said. "Joe's just tipped us off that he owned

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the Department, from the commissioner down. An' seein' that he did it before a coupla friends of mine, I slapped him under arrest. How long till I can look for a writ to spring him?—What?—Oh, about the girl he just mentioned? Nope. That ain't quite all of it. There's a little matter of murder—a hook-up with the Kenton case.—Sure, I could do that if you say so.—Okay, I'll send him over."

His glance lifted to Palloni. "All right, Joe. He wants to see you. Scram out of here," he advised.

"An' that's how we call your bluff!" the gangster rasped.

"Well, maybe." Johnson replaced the receiver on its rest. "But I wouldn't be too sure of it. There's a thing called history, Joe, an' the darned thing's got a habit of repeatin'. It's funny about these United States. The people will stand for a lot and then some day—*blooie!* They grab an ax an' chop off the dog's head. Tell Richfield I'm givin' you twenty-four hours to get that girl back to school."

For a moment, Palloni made no move. Then he rested a hand on the desk.

"I'll get you for this, Johnson," he rasped. "I'll get you. It's a promise!"

"I don't doubt it, Joe," Johnson said, and looked him in the eyes. "I ain't sure a bunch of your gorillas didn't try it out on the West Park viaduct, when they sideswiped my machine last night. Still, it's mighty careless of you to say anything like that before other folks. As I told you, you talk too much.—Now, you scram over an' see Richfield, an' tell him I'm givin' you twenty-four hours — from right now."

"Arrh!" Palloni voiced an animal snarl, spun on his feet, and went out.

"Did you mean that?" Bryce demanded. "About what happened to us last night?"

"I don't know, of course," Johnson scowled. "But I wouldn't be surprised. There's one thing certain—whoever is back of the Kenton killin' is havin' us tailed as close as we'd tail him, if we knew who he was. As for the Martin girl, I'm lookin' for results. Richfield's clever. That's why Palloni pays his price.—Now, about this realty investment stuff. It's apt to be crooked, if Dobbie's in it. You seein' Dual to-night?"

"Sure." Jim nodded.

"Okay," Johnson said. "I'm after the dope on the gig. If I get it, I'll go with you.—Just a minute!" He lifted the telephone and spoke to the Identification Bureau, grunted acceptance.

"The only prints on your letter was yours an' mine.—Let's eat. It's after one."

WE lunched, then went back and saw O'Niel, to little result. The man was sunk in a depth of brooding, from which he was difficult to rouse.

He admitted that Miss Kenton had known Cerra. "I never liked the fellow, myself," he said.

"Did he speak to her, or come to your table, the other night?" I asked.

"Why—" O'Niel began, and frowned. "He didn't come to the table; but he—he sort of twiddled his thumb and finger at her from a distance—just before she sent me to the check room— My God, Mr. Glace, do you think it could have been a signal, and that she sent me away so she could speak with him? Do you think he—?"

"We don't yet know what we think," said Jim. "Did you see him afterward, O'Niel?"

"No." O'Niel shook his head.

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"Say, stop it, will you? Stop making me think such things."

"Okay, son," Bryce assented. "What brand of cigarettes did Miss Kenton smoke?"

"Why, the same as I do." O'Niel scowled and drew a pack from his pocket. "What's that got to do with the thing? The whole thing's crazy. Richfield asked me about it this morning. Only he wanted to know about Dick and Gladys, too. He said it might be a means of proving my innocence. But's that insane."

"Maybe not," said Jim. "Did either Torrance or Miss Ingham smoke a Turkish cigarette?"

"Turkish? You mean scented?" O'Niel said vaguely. "Why, no.—But that damned gigolo did! I know, because I hate the odor; and once, when he did come to our table, he lit one, smoked part of it, and ground out the butt before he left."

"Ground it out, huh?"

"Yes—rubbed the end of it in an ash tray, you know," O'Niel nodded.

Bryce interrupted. "Did Miss Kenton ever tell you that she was the secretary of a real estate corporation?"

"Why, yes. The Realty Investment Corporation," O'Niel assented at once. "They bought up mortgages, the way I understood it, and sold the property at a profit. Margaret had a brilliant business sense, you know."

"She sure did," Bryce agreed, and once more changed the subject. "Seen Miss Ingham to-day?"

"No. But I'm expecting her this afternoon," O'Niel replied. "I told her not to come, but she insisted that she would. She's—like that."

"Most women are," Jim said dryly. "An' if she runs true to form, you tell her we'd like to see her."

When we had left the cell, Jim said, I got more than a hunch that that dancin' man was in the Kenton frail's room *after* she was gunned.

"What's the idea of leaving word for Miss Ingham to call?" I asked.

Bryce chuckled. "I was thinkin' we might ask her if she mailed that five hundred to us, last night."

"And you think she'd tell you?"

"Well, that's an open question," he grinned. "But she might, without meanin' to, if I asked her sudden. Anyway, I'd like to hear what she says about bein' over there with Torrance last night."

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK.

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STRANGER *than* FICTION

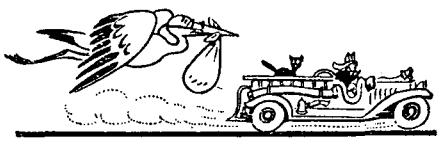
By JOHN S. STUART

BRING YOUR OWN SILVER

TRAVELERS in the middle ages always carried with them any implements for eating which it was their custom to use. It was not until the end of the Sixteenth Century that inns supplied knives and spoons. And forks followed a century later, when Thomas Coryate, an English traveler, noticed them in Italy and then introduced them into England. For table use, they were long regarded as an affectation.

LHASA ELECTRIFIED

BEFORE the previous Dalai Lama died, he ordered that electric light be installed in Lhasa. The order was on a large sheet of rice paper, and it called for arc-light and incandescent bulb equipment. All the equipment went through Darjeeling, India. It had to be transported by yaks and Tibetan porters over mountain passes that were often 17,000 feet high. No case could weigh more than eighty pounds; cables had to be cut to twenty-yard lengths. But Lhasa must have modern lights—and eventually radio sets and perhaps electric stoves.

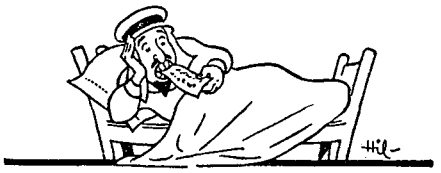


FIVE-ALARM FIRE

FELICIA, the cat mascot of Chicago Engine Company No. 48, attends every fire. One night, when the engine left the station house, she hopped on the running board as usual. When the firemen had put out the fire they came back to the engine. There they found Felicia—with five kittens. She had completed her job during business hours, too.

FISH WITH FALSE TEETH

A FISHERMAN of Leeds, England, caught a fish with a set of artificial teeth in its body. The fish was rock codling, and as the hook was well down, the angler had to gut the fish to get it out. Eventually it was found that the hook was fastened to the bottom half of a set of false teeth which the fish had swallowed!



SWALLOWING THE PRESCRIPTION

IF a Bedouin falls ill and calls in a *hakim* (physician), he is apt to be ordered to write down certain sentences from the Koran. In order to secure relief from his ills, he is directed to swallow the paper—or else soak it in water and drink the water, so as to swallow the ink in which the sacred words have been written. Since the Arabs are unusually healthy, they usually recover.

"HENRY LOVES ANNE"

INITIALS carved on birchbark trees or desks in country schoolhouses are not really new. At Wickham Court, in Kent, England, you can still see the entwined initials "H" and "A" which Henry VIII carved when he was courting Anne Boleyn, four hundred years ago. They are carved or painted everywhere about the house—on the twisted chimneys, in the carved doors, and on the tiny stained-glass "tryst" window at the north entrance. Anne Boleyn lost her head to her king—in more ways than usual.

This feature appears in ARGOSY every week

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Two Days to Live

By J. ALLAN DUNN

Author of "60° Above and Below," "Forbidden Mountain," etc.

Gullah magic, an eccentric landowner, and a horror-haunted South Carolina mansion face Detective Hugh Strong

The black's naked body was wet and slippery

CHAPTER I.

HOUSE OF MYSTERY.

NOBODY had less of what is generally called superstition in his nature than Hugh Strong. Yet he felt the intangible, invisible, indescribable menace of the place the moment he sighted the manor house through the high, elaborate, wrought-iron gates. It stood at the end of the oak-shadowed drive, and it was the menace about the place, its brooding sense of peril, subtle as some dangerous miasma, that Strong had been summoned to dismiss.

He was not surprised at the remarks of his driver, as that sallow-faced Carolinan braked his jimcrack car in front of the entrance. The man jerked at the metal bell handle that hung from a chain attached to one of the stone pillars of the gateway, swung down Strong's two kitbags, and spat a liberal jet of tobacco juice at a weed.

Strong thought he heard the distant clang of a bell as the driver climbed back to his seat and spoke to him.

"Only visitors that's expected are 'lowed inside. Suits *me!* You couldn't git *me* inside them gates fur a thousan' dollahs. No, *suh!*—An' I don't mean the dawgs.—The yeller man'll be erlong."

He was yellow enough himself—from swamp-fever.

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He spat again, and accurately, at the weed, as if to show his contempt of the place and all who dwelled therein. Then he was gone, swirling up red dust in which car and man vanished.

ing on the bell chain once more when he saw the great shapes that came silently padding out of unseen paths in the undergrowth.

One by one they came, until there

Novelette—
Complete

The excited Colonel might not hold his fire

There was a nondescript heraldic device atop each of the stone pillars, almost hidden by vines. From the pillars a high brick wall marched around the manor grounds, armed with talons of incurved iron set in mortar. The enormous liveoaks joined their massive boughs along the avenue. Gray moss hung like the funereal banners of bygone hopes.

Shrubbery, making a jungle, backed up the oaks. Sunshine filtered patchily through, and sometimes showed yellow jasmine or mangolia blooms. Here and there, half-smothered azaleas tried to flaunt their vivid flowers. An exotic scent hung in the air, with the too-sweet fragrance that suggests decay.

Strong had begun to think of haul-

were six of them, enormous mastiffs, their motley, brindle coats unseen until they came into the open. At the shoulders they were half as tall as Strong, who was a full six feet; and they were not many pounds lighter.

It was plain that they had been on patrol, gathering when the bell warned them of an intruder. They came toward Strong with a leisurely assurance that was emphasized by their half-yawning, drooling jaws and the gleam of fangs over which red tongues slid back and forth.

The shadows dappled them, making them seem like eerie, goblin creatures. Snuffling, they gave low growls of warning. A man, even if he were armed, would have slight chance

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against one of them, and none at all against two.

THEN Strong saw the "yeller man" approaching.

He had expected a Chinaman, but hardly one like this. He knew something of the race, from his travels in the Orient, and here was a man who was hallmarked with high caste; a Chinaman who spoke Mandarin rather than Cantonese. His white clothes fitted his tall, lean figure precisely, and they were cut in Chinese fashion. He walked with assurance, and he was neither deferential nor disrespectful. His eyes and brow were those of a scholar.

The big dogs swung about to look at him, then fell in like an escort. Their heads were higher than the yellow man's hips.

Behind him, hurrying along at an ungainly shamble because one leg was shorter than the other, came a Negro, breaking out into the avenue from some path in the shrubbery. He also wore whites, of no definite pattern, which hung loosely on his grotesque figure.

His back was humped. Strong thought, looking at his eyes, that there was more than a hint of madness in them. Both eyes were hawed with red membranes, like those of the mastiffs. One eye had a bluish film, as if from a cataract.

Old, the black man was, with wisps of white wool on his half-bald pate. His arms were long, and he looked not unlike a dressed-up ape, scuffing along, barefoot. But he was not decrepit; he somehow gave the impression of great strength. He seemed to be amiable enough, until a mastiff got in his way. Then he suddenly snarled at the dog, like an old man baboon, showing two yellow tusks in the upper jaw that bracketed teeth that had been filed almost to points. One eye flamed, the other stayed dull.

Obviously he was a Gullah Negro, one of the original shipload, perhaps, from the Bight of Benin, the armpit of Africa. Left on the sea islands of the Carolina coast to fend for themselves, after the slaver skipper learned of the signing of the Emancipation Act, these Gullahs had adapted themselves to the country.

As the old Negro halted behind the Chinaman, Strong was reminded of a Solomon Islander, childish yet crafty, his nature simple and unstable, fawning or virulent by turn.

The yellow man unlocked the gates with a ponderous key in a well-oiled lock.

"If you will please let the dogs take your smell, Misteh Stlong," he said with a bow, "it will be betteh, I think."

Strong stood stock still while the brutes sniffed at him. It was a suggestion that no man was likely to ignore.

The black picked up the two kitbags and shuffled off. The dogs wheeled, satisfied, returning to their patrols. Strong remembered they had not once barked since his arrival. They were grim guardians.

FOR a moment Strong had a fantasy that this was not America; rather, that he was in some web of enchantment, environed in a strange dimension. Time and place seemed figments of a dream. He had a curious feeling of unreality, such as occasionally rocks the balance of the sanest of mankind. It was born of the half-light under the moss-draped oaks; of the appearance of the slender Chinese majordomo; of the black hunchback; of the brindled dogs; of the exotic per-

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fume of the flowers. It seemed to Strong that he was gazing upon a painted scene, set for a tragedy. The brooding menace was almost tangible, close at hand.

He had felt the same way in savage jungles, hearing the booming message-drums, knowing that naked pigmies were in the tangled bush or swinging through the trees, armed with blow-guns and poisoned darts and coveting a white man's skull for a trophy and his heart, liver and brain to make themselves strong.

That passed. The Chinaman was speaking, his inflections sing-song and high-pitched.

"My name Chan Lung, *comprador* for Colonel Fulke. At this hour he sleep. He wish to be excuse'. Missy Cahson will see you."

The word *comprador* had an Eastern tang. It indicated stewardship and a position of responsibility.

"Were you with Colonel Fulke in the Orient?" asked Strong.

Chan's slanting eyes became inscrutable, like the eyes of all his race when questioned by an alien. He might be lying; Strong could not tell.

"No," answered the *comprador*. "I come to Colonel Fulke in this country, two yea' ago."

STRONG speculated about "Missy Cahson." He knew nothing more about Colonel Bertram Fulke, of Fulke Manor, than Pringle had told him when he was in Philadelphia.

He and Pringle had been friends at college, comrades during the War. Afterward, Pringle had gone into the law and Strong had gone roving. Now he was a specialist in private investigation; he had a select agency, with a hand-picked clientele.

"Fulke is a crank," Pringle had told him. "He's traveled a lot; written a book or two. He's got an obsession now that his life is in danger. He wants protection, and he has asked us to provide it. The firm has been attorneys for the estate for generations. You can name your own fee. Fulke is wealthy. He has taken certain precautions of his own, but he has made up his mind that his death has been decreed."

"Sane?" asked Strong.

Pringle shrugged his shoulders.

"You can judge for yourself. He's pretty capable of taking care of himself, I fancy, though he's well over sixty. He insisted that his protector be not only intelligent, but a gentleman. The job is yours, if you want it."

"I could use a vacation," said Strong. "Any quail at Fulke Manor?"

"Quail in South Carolina are a common nuisance," Pringle assured him. "Take along your shotgun."

The weapon was now in its case, at the bottom of one of Strong's kitbags. But he did not think he was going to get much quail shooting down here. He carried an automatic pistol in a shoulder clip, and it occurred to him that that might prove more useful.

They were halfway to the house, which was built of old red brick and white stone, vine-mantled, beautiful and stately, when Strong saw the dead bird. It lay right in his path, almost at his feet, in a streak of sunlight. He could have sworn that it was not there the moment before.—A mocking bird, wings half open, lying on its back, a tiny drop of blood, like a ruby, at the end of its beak.

Strong picked it up. Its neck had been wrung, but the body was still warm; the eyes held a dim luster that faded even as he examined the bird. Chan Lung was a little ahead. He

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halted and turned, as if he had heard the check of Strong's footfall in the dust.

Strong showed him the bird. "What do you make of this?" he asked.

Again the baffling film shrouded Chan's orbs. He might know why the visitor had come; he might resent his presence and consider all inquisition a personal insult. Strong considered.

"I not know," said the *comprador*. "Many things die velly stlange along this place. Mebbe you find out why?"

His voice seemed to Strong to hold faint mockery. Chinese were hard to read. For the third time, the "feel" of mystery and menace manifested itself. Strong did not surrender to it, but it had been there, knocking at the gate.

Then he saw the girl.

His blood flowed more normally. She, at least, was eminently natural—and attractive.

SHE stood at the head of a curving double flight of stone steps. They were flanked by balustrades and pillars, on each of the latter stone urns in which striped agaves grew lustily. Behind her, behind pillars to the right and left, a porch ran the width of the main wing.

Strong slid the dead bird beneath the fleshy, spiny leaves of the right-hand urn, and went up the steps.

The girl was in a white gown that announced a perfect figure, without intimately revealing it. She was pale, though not from ill health. Her dark eyes were lustrous, her lips scarlet—with their own pigment.

Hugh Strong did not consider himself romantic, but he could appreciate charm and beauty in a woman. He reserved judgment concerning their dispositions, remembering always that Delilah must have been a magnetic and beautiful woman. And so, no doubt, was Salome.

"I am Mary Carson," she said, "Colonel Fulke's secretary. He is resting. He has not been well of late, with too high blood-pressure. He wished me to tell you he would be sure to see you at dinner."

Her hand, as he took it, was warm and vital.

Chan had disappeared. Now he showed again, as the front door opened in the shadow of the deep porch.

"Chan will show you to your room," said Mary Carson.

It seemed to Strong there was a latent antagonism between the girl and the *comprador*, as if Chan strove to express equality with the secretary. And he somehow fancied that she resented it.

"Colonel Fulke likes to dress for dinner," she said. "Of course, his guests suit their own convenience."

Strong had brought his dinner clothes along.

"What time is dinner?" he asked.

"At eight o'clock. There will be a gong. Perhaps, after you wash up you would like to see the grounds before dark?"

It might be a casual invitation, a mere politeness—or else the girl knew why he was there. Pringle had seemed to think that Fulke was covering up the reason for Strong's visit.

Strong thanked her, and followed as Chan led him to his quarters on the second floor. There were a bedroom and sitting room, the latter at the front of the house, and giving to a balcony over the porch. There was also a private bathroom.

Chan pointed to a second door in the bedroom.

"Colonel Fulke, he sleep on otheh

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side," he said, unstrapping the kitbags.

The bags were locked, and Strong told the *comprador* that he would unpack, and Chan left, with something that was not quite an obeisance.

Strong bathed and changed, though not for dinner. He put on the clip and harness that carried the automatic pistol.

As he descended the stairs, the girl came out of a room below. They went outside together.

"You're not afraid of the dogs?" he asked.

"They do not bother any of us who are white," she said. "Not once they know your scent. They know yours now.—But they do not like the colored people. And none of the blacks will go out after dark, once they have gone to their own quarters. They do not live here in the main house."

"How about Chan?" he asked her. "He is neither white nor black."

"No. Chan is yellow, I suppose. Yet he actually has more control over the dogs than any one. He feeds them, of course. It is silly, I know, but sometimes I think he talks to them in a special language which they understand. They certainly obey him, anyway."

The sun was low, and its almost level rays made the draped trees seem more than ever like scenery lacking a third dimension. The air was heavy with perfume. The girl had a basket and clippers.

"I MEANT to get flowers this morning," she said, "but I was too busy. It does not do to pick them in the heat of the day."

They walked toward the gates; turned off on a curving path. The gleam of water showed golden-red in the sunset, where the light worked through.

She cut sprays of azalea and yellow jasmine. There was a cascade of the bell-shaped blooms that showed at the f rk of a tree, close to the pool, where v aterlilies grew thickly.

"That is a fine spray," she said. "A little above my reach. Perhaps—?"

Strong took her clippers and, going to the tree, lifted his arms. Before he touched the yellow blossoms the leaves of the vine shook, ever so slightly.

A blunt head showed, white-lipped and fanged. It reared and struck at his wrist.

Strong hit at the serpent with the clippers, stepping back and whipping out his gun as the cottonmouth-moccasin slid to the ground, writhing and vicious. But it was not disabled until Strong's bullet smashed its ugly head.

The girl stood with every vestige of color drained from her face, her dark eyes wide, her red lips pale as the lily petals in the pool.

"It nearly bit you," she said. "It would have killed you."

"Close call," Strong said dryly. "I didn't know cottonmouths climbed trees. Few snakes do, outside of the boas. It was almost as if the thing had been planted in that fork."

She drew back from him.

"It was I who asked you to get the jasmine—" she said.

Strong apologized, but not too sincerely. Again the menace seemed close.

The girl approached him. She shivered. It was getting dark. Only a few beams of the lowering sun struggled through the growth, red as blood. She put her hand on his arm. It was no longer warm; he could feel the chill of it through the light cloth of his sleeve.

"Mr. Strong," she said, half whispering, "it is lucky that you carry a gun—and that you know how to use it.

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I don't know why you came to Fulke Manor, but I tell you now—leave it. To-night. Don't sleep beneath its roof! —I am telling you this for your own good. I can't say any more. I've warned you.—I saw you put the dead bird in the urn."

There came to them a distant sound as of flogged carpets.

"That is Barry Ford," said the girl, in answer to the question on his face. "He is chopping wood—for exercise, he says.—Please do as I ask. Go."

Strong, cynical in his profession, wondered. It looked as if that snake, coiled in the crotch of the tree and hidden by the flowers, had been a trap. And that she had led him to it. Now she begged him to go.

It was part of the enigma of Fulke Manor, and he had set out to solve it.

"*You* are staying here," he said, but he did not analyze the reasons that prompted the sentence.

"I have cause to.—Let us go back to the house. Then you must go."

"Not until I have seen Colonel Fulke," said Strong. "Also, I am hungry."

Lights were on in the house. Chan Lung was on the porch, like a phantom in the gloom.

"Colonel, he speak he like see you, missy," he said.

The sound of wood-chopping had ceased. Strong hoped that the sound of his gun had been drowned by the axe.

He went on up to his rooms, this time to change for dinner. He opened the long window of his bedroom, the window leading to the balcony. A mocking bird was singing madly. A full moon was rising. But the air seemed chill.

Out in the garden, one of the mastiffs bayed. Another answered it. Then there was silence . . .

CHAPTER II.

A NEW WILL.

STRONG had just succeeded in getting his dinner tie arranged to his liking. He was wondering, as he adjusted the ends precisely, just how he ought to place the incident of the snake and Mary Carson.

Chan knocked on the door that led to Colonel Fulke's quarters.

"The colonel would be glad," said Chan, "if you join him and Misteh Fo'd in the libelly fo' shelly and bitteh befo' dinneh."

It was strange, Strong thought, how the yellow man's personality and his innate dignity carried off the slurring of his English pronunciation. Chan Lung was a person to be respected.

The servant showed Strong into the paneled library with due formality. Chan had changed his white attire to black silk that lacked luster but not richness. The pantaloons fitted closely, the well fitting tunic had small gilded or golden buttons holding the frogs, his hose and his felt-soled shoes were black. He moved like a fencer, silently.

There were two men in the library. It was impossible to mistake them, though Strong held a fleeting impression of a vague resemblance between them—certain contours—that did not register so well on closer inspection.

It was impossible to mistake Colonel Fulke. Tall, bony and harsh of features, tropic-red of skin, under the stiff thatch of gray hair, he stood erect as a pikestaff in his white mess-jacket and waistcoat. Instinctively, one looked for decorations on his chest. There was a black eyeglass ribbon.

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He was affable, but Strong imagined that he would rise to swift and not lightly relinquished anger. An air of command emanated from him; he had the imperative, unrelenting power of rank. What he wanted he would take, without compunction. He could be generous, but he was more apt to be intolerant. He was a man who would make many enemies, Strong told himself. An occasional one might be loved, but far more would be hated.

Like Strong, Barry Ford wore black dinner clothes. He was loose-jointed, slightly stooped at the shoulders. He gave out the conflicting suggestion of being both a recluse and a student and a man who led an active life. There was something not entirely healthy about him, but Strong fancied him physically sound. His handclasp, at least, had plenty of vigor. He might have been considered good looking, had his lips not been too thin and his teeth too prominent. He was inclined to be slightly supercilious, and Strong gained from him a distinct impression of hostility. The man's palm was inclined to be clammy.

"You know why I'm here, at any rate," Strong said to himself, "and for reasons of your own you resent it."

Colonel Fulke merely introduced the two men, without comment. Chan poured sherry into thin crystal, dropped orange bitters into the glasses, and served them. The three men drank rather ceremoniously.

The master of the manor—to the manor born, his horse-face flushed with the bronze of sunburn, or it might be a touch of high blood-pressure—stood back to the hearth, with its fireplace of exquisitely carven wood.

He was the sort of leader whose men would itch to shoot him in the back, as he led them on. Strong did not doubt that he would have led, equally well, an overwhelming onset or a forlorn hope. He had courage, martinet and despot though he might be. Now, believing himself under sentence of death, he made no mention of it until Barry Ford broached the subject.

"I WISH you luck, Mr. Strong," Ford said, formally and without heartiness. "I must tell you that I do not think your visit is necessary. These warnings which the Colonel has received are a lot of *ju-ju* silliness, the weak protest of the Gullahs whom he evicted from their cabins in the swamp."

"That was purely a health measure," said Fulke. "It wouldn't have paid to drain it. As it is, there is no sewage; there are too many mosquitoes, and so —malaria and typhoid. All their children had rickets. I couldn't explain it to the beggars. Doubtless they resent it.—But this is not Gullah *ju-ju*. Not that that is to be despised. Barry has not had my experience, nor yours, Strong. Black magic is practised round the world. Even white men, in this country, have their hexes. It makes little difference whether you call it obeah or anaana. Kahunas, shamans, voodoo doctors, faquirs, bonzes — white, yellow, brown or black. They vary in their rituals, but the results are about the same. Born of hatred, revenge, spite, jealousy. Pretty damned universal. This affair is a bit more subtle than most.—More sherry? No? Then let's go in to dinner."

The meal was excellent; the service matched it. Chan presided over two colored boys, one as brown as a wet seal, the other saddle-hued and with a reddish tinge in his kinky hair.

Mary Carson wore a sleeveless, backless gown of dark purple, the

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color of a pansy, cut high to her fine throat. Her face was a cameo in the candlelight; the texture of the skin on her arms like magnolia petals. She said little, but her presence was quite manifest. There was restraint in her. She was like a dynamo, charged with current, waiting for the proper contacts.

Barry Ford would like to make those contacts, Strong believed.

From the talks, Strong gathered that she was aiding Colonel Fulke to compile his latest book of life experiences and observations.

"I'll come to the place where I am ready to reminisce," said Fulke. "Damn it! These days I *creak* when I get on a horse! The tide's going out.—I'd like to get the book finished, but it takes longer than one at first expects."

That was the only reference he made to the menace until after dinner, when he and Strong were in the library. Barry was with them, at first. The girl had said she had some notes she wanted to transcribe.

Coffee was served in the library by Chan.

"How about a fire, Barry?" asked Fulke. "My blood is still thin," he added to Strong. "It is chilly, of a night, until April, even in South Carolina, and Barry is a specialist on fire-making. He makes a fetish of it."

Chan had gone. Strong was surprised to see Barry Ford building a fire, choosing logs carefully from an iron-bound box that looked as if it might once have been a sea chest. The logs were of varying thickness, but all of the same length. Some showed smoothly-sawed ends; others had one end expertly axed.

"These blacks waste wood, just as they waste everything else," said Ford, placing birchbark rolls for kindling. "I furnish the logs—keep myself in shape doing it—and I like to make the fires for the hearths. I use walnut, cypress, swamp-oak, pine, birch and gum. I can give you color and perfume; make a fire to match your mood. There," he ended, as he touched match to the bark, "that's a fire that will last two hours, without touch from devil-iron or poker."

BLUE and yellow flames turned to orange, vermilion, crimson and purple. A cheerful crackling started, while the smell of gums and saps stole into the room like incense.

"I'm going to tinker about a bit in my lab," said Ford. "Might play chess with Mary, later—when she gets through."

"*Quite* a tinker, is Barry," the Colonel remarked with a chuckle as Ford left the room. "No definite purpose—unless it is marrying Mary Carson. He dabbles in chemistry; is quite a naturalist. He's general engineer for the manor; runs the lighting plant, looks out for the water supply and plumbing. Damned useful and ingenious, but a bit vague.—Have a cheroot? Imported Trichinopolies."

Strong gladly accepted the roll of tobacco, kept in tea leaves in a lacquered box. He drew out the straw from its center, lit the fragrant weed.

"Barry is a distant relation of mine," Fulke went on. "I have legally adopted him as my heir, but he retains his own name.—Now, I've something to show you."

He shifted some books, reached into a section of the shelving, seemed to press something. Another section slid aside. It had been perfectly masked by the fronts of books, made up from actual volumes that had once been in use. The door of a safe was disclosed.

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"There used to be a way, back of that safe," Fulke said, clearing his cheroot of ash, "that led to a false space between the cellar walls. The family did a bit of smuggling—piracy, perhaps—in the old days. They didn't like 'King's duties' any more than the Puritans.—The cache was empty, though, when the manor came down to me. I put in the safe. There's not much in it. Some cash, my will—and these reminders."

He brought out a metal box, opened it, sorted its contents.

"This was the first," he said.

Strong looked at an oblong of stiff brown paper. A black feather was attached to it, the quill having been thrust through the lift of a double slit in the paper. Below were eight letters in block capitals; just two words—ONE MONTH—over a skull in silhouette. It was neatly done.

"Nothing Gullah about that, eh?" said Fulke. "That arrived on the last of January. It was on this table when I came in after dinner. I don't have to tell you the significance of a black feather, either crow's or raven's, in any place or age. It means death.—

"Since then, every five days, I get a little souvenir like this, found here and there, always where I cannot miss it. Skullduggery, of course; but pertinent."

Strong looked at leaves which had evidently been torn from a calendar pad of the current month. Altogether there were five of them. They might yield fingerprints, under iodine vapor, but Strong had never been too keen for fingerprints. Too often they were blurred and incomplete. Unless they happened to be on record, their tracing covered entirely too much territory.

The rest of the calendar might be found, but he doubted it. He was inclined to think, with Fulke, that this affair was a subtle one.

"I GOT the fifth yesterday at dinner, beneath my service-plate," said Fulke grimly. "You see, they chose the shortest month in the year. According to their predictions, I have just two days more to live."

His hand did not shake as he again flicked off the ash from his cheroot, but Strong could tell that Fulke had been sold to the idea of the extreme probability of his death, on or before the last day of the month.

"There have been various other tokens, from time to time," the Colonel went on. "All of them symbols of death, in the shape of creatures that but a little while before I found them had been alive—a mouse—a toad—a mole stuffed into the toe of my bedroom slipper. That was the day I bought the dogs in Charleston and closed off the house to all but known visitors, refusing admission even to tradesmen. I got Barry to lop off all the boughs of the trees along the wall. Those mastiffs are from an old, slave-hunting strain; there's some bloodhound in them, I imagine. At any rate, they hate the blacks."

"And they shut out any idea of interference from beyond the wall," said Strong. "Well, that seems to bring this down to an inside job, though there might still be some collusion. Dogs like yours—or any dogs, for that matter—never make a really adequate defense against anybody who is smart enough to toss over a wall juicy cuts of beef, well larded with strychnine or cyanide."

Fulke nodded agreement.

He brought from the safe a precious bottle of true Napoleon brandy, well over a hundred years old. He brimmed

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two liqueur glasses which he took from a cabinet, and the odor of sun-ripened grapes filled the room.

"I'd like to finish that autobiography of mine," he said. "It will take several months yet. That's why I got Pringle to send me some one. I have been threatened with death plenty of times; I have been cursed, wished, and prayed-to-death! I have held a good many responsible positions in my life, and I have never had a light hand. Moreover, I have lived fully, and not always according to Hoyle.

"There might be a score of men and women with long memories who would be very willing to kill me; but as you say, this seems to be limited to my household. Here is a list which I made out for you. Every one, except Chan, and of course Barry, Mary and myself, sleep in quarters. That is an old barracoon of coquina cement, at the back.

Strong conned the list; ten in all—three white, one yellow, six of various degrees of negroid blood and color.

"HOW about any special motives here?" he asked.

Fulke laughed. "Plenty. Barry.—To get hold of money enough to marry Mary Carson, and to do whatever he may really want to do. He's a secretive, resentful sort, when you get to know him. He had a tough childhood, and he's never yet forgiven the world in general.

"Mary Carson.—Never trust a woman. She is clever and ambitious. She has more brains than Barry. He's crazy about her, but she can mold him like wax. I don't believe she loves him; but she is perfectly sure that she will only live one life, and she means to make the most of it. Circumstances have been against her."

"Chan Lung.—He knows he is down for a bequest of ten thousand dollars. Conditions have thwarted him. This job with me is only a means to a definite end. With that money, he can leave a country and a people he considers infinitely the inferiors of his own race—and with a good deal of justice. He can go to Indo-China and there work out his own destiny.

"Ngaru.—They call him Garry, but Ngaru is his tribal name. He carried in your bags. I've promised him a bit of land, with good soil and a decent cabin; I've also invested funds to bring him in twenty-five dollars a month—riches to Ngaru. I'd call him faithful, if I didn't know how closely his sort cling to tribal affiliations. These Gullahs have the brains of children. Emotions rule them.

"Melissy.—She claims that her ten-year-old boy is a Fulke. She is mulatto herself. Pretty enough, but with those modern ideas which some fool whites put into their heads these days. They coddle them, call their singing, their poems and their crude plays works of genius. Melissy and her child are provided for, and she knows it. She might want to cash in.—Decidedly dangerous.

"Baba.—Melissy's grandmother, a conjure-woman. She's of no use on the place, and she ought to be in an institution. She's senile and crazy, believes ghosts advise her, and makes the other niggers believe it. She might try to poison me. Chan looks out for that sort of thing.—Baba is afraid of Chan.

"To wind up, Strong, I don't trust anybody here except, at this moment, yourself. As for you, you are set down in my will for a sum of twenty-five thousand dollars above your regular fees, if you discover my murderer and bring him to justice.

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"You will get ten thousand dollars in any event, if I am still alive on March the first. They are trying to fluster me with their portents; trying to work me up to a stroke with my high blood-pressure.—Whoever is back of this won't use ordinary, obvious means, Strong. They may try to cover their plans with *ju-ju* tricks, but you'll find them subtle—subtle!"

He poured himself another liqueur glass of the potent brandy. He flushed like an amorous turkey-cock, and Strong feared he might have a stroke right then.

He shifted the angle of the talk.

"It must be a recent will, to include me in it," he said.

Fulke's eyes crinkled. He had his own ironic ideas of humor.

"It is," he said. "I had my lawyer up from Charleston, the day after I received Pringle's reply saying you would take the case and that you would arrive on the twenty-sixth. As a matter of fact, in this State a holographic will is legal; but I wanted witnesses. I had my own notion about this being an inside affair.

"There is a clause in that will, which is now inside that safe, that states that if I should die a violent death before midnight, on the last day of the current month, all beneficiaries named, save yourself, are voided of their bequests. My estate will then go to various charities."

STRONG said nothing. It was in his mind that Colonel Fulke, though doubtless the State would proclaim him of sound mind, had a streak of madness in him. He suspected everybody. His past life might have given him cause for mistrust, but his suspicions had developed into a form of mania.

That twelve-year-old child of Melissy's was most likely his. No doubt he had the feudal ideas of the "right of the overlord" that many Southern landowners entertained in early years.

Nevertheless, the will was a precaution.

"They all know about it," said Fulke. "I took good care of that."

Strong believed that a murderer might kill purely for revenge, or for any primitive emotion, setting aside the mere question of material gain. But he was silent on that point.

"I'd like to keep in constant touch with you, day and night, for the next fifty hours," he said. "I understand I'm sleeping next to you."

"Yes. We'll have the door open and a screen set there. I don't sleep well with a light. And I sleep fitfully. I am armed day and night, and I am an excellent shot. You have your own weapons, of course. Suppose we look in on the chess players, then turn in?"

The library had tall windows that looked out across a veranda to a garden better tended than the one in front. Strong moved toward the chess players to look at their catches. But Ford and Mary Carson had not been playing chess. He saw their figures, shadowy but distinct, on a path mottled by moonlight.

There were flowers out there, moonlight, mockingbirds. Strong felt, for the first time in his life, a sudden stab of jealousy. He did not believe the girl was as worldly as Fulke had inferred. Certainly, Ford was not worthy of her.

Over his shoulder the Colonel chuckled.

"A night for lovers!" he said.

Just then the girl broke apart from Ford, as if he had said something to offend her. She came swiftly ahead of

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him, almost running, a light shawl trailing from her shoulders.

"And a quarrel!" continued the Colonel. "Let us go upstairs, Strong. It is not for us to interfere with the destinies of youth."

For a moment Strong fiercely resented the imputation that he was not of the same generation as Mary Carson and Barry Ford. But it was true, and he knew it.

In his own bedroom he set his automatic handy on the bedside table. He assembled his shotgun, set shells in the breech, slid the safety catch.

He felt quite definitely that he liked neither Colonel Fulke nor Barry Ford; but he was there to protect the former, and he would do his best.

He saw one vital flaw in Fulke's announcement of his will, with its posthumous penalties.

If Fulke died suddenly, Barry Ford had been acknowledged to be his next of kin. Should that last will be missing, or be destroyed, Ford would inherit, *ipso facto*.

He wondered if Ford knew the secret of the sliding section and the combination of the safe?—Did Mary Carson know?

CHAPTER III.

DARK PROWLERS.

STRONG came out of sleep with all his faculties alert, the blood tingling in his veins, and his skin pimpling in gooseflesh, where the hairs of his remoter ancestors would have lifted their fur.

Moonlight drifted in through his window in beams almost horizontal. The smell of jasmine was strong. A mockingbird was singing, and then its throbbing aria was blotted out as a great dog bayed the moon; the animal howled like a banshee, sensing death; a mournful and sinister sound that stirred up primitive reactions, checked and chilled the pulsing blood. Then the noise changed to a savage snarling, and shifted to long drawn out yelps.

It died away altogether; and now there sounded the fierce barking of a pack, hot on the scent, or sight, of a quarry. Great, coughing roars in a rabid, violent tumult, wild and terrible.

Strong swung out of bed in the dark, finding slippers, gun-harness and weapon, and his assembled shotgun. He did not turn on a light as he stepped out on the balcony.

The moonlight brushed the tops of the trees. Beneath that pallid gleam the grounds were a black jungle, out of which came the spasmodic ravening fury of the dogs. It seemed as if their uproar must rend the throats that issued it.

A chase was on. The clamor must surely awaken all the household. In their quarters the blacks were probably cowering. It would go hard with any man the dogs dragged down. The six of them would be close to half a ton of living violence.

Then he glimpsed the fugitive, just before lights flashed on below; and a moment later Colonel Fulke stepped out of his own window to the balcony, beside Strong.

It was a vague, amorphous shape that suddenly seemed to materialize out of the cavernous shadows below. It leaped upward from the soil, its hands caught at a bough high above its head. It seemed to bear a burden on its back; to be imbued with fear that lent it supernatural force. It grasped the branch, and leaves rustled and shook. The creature was fleeing through the

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mantled oaks, swinging from bough to bough like a great ape.

The light from the windows, fighting through the gloom, showed the turmoil of the slavering dogs, making the night hideous under the tree with their sonorous, bloodthirsty clamor.

"Gone away!" said Fulke, his voice serene but vibrant.

He had a long-barreled revolver, with a flash light on the end of the muzzle. Let that rest on a target, with a steady hand, and a score was certain.

In the gaps of the staccato, quiet-shattering uproar, Barry Ford's voice could be heard, shouting excitedly to somebody—doubtless the girl—to stay in the house.

A whistle sounded shrilly, again and again. The dogs heard it; heeded it.

THEN Chan appeared in the scope of the light from the house. He was still in black. Lithe and confident, he stepped toward the dogs, who were baying at fault.

He spoke to them in his high, singsong, in pagan syllables, and their fury left them. They crowded about him, fawning.

"Come on!" cried Fulke. "We'll get the beggar!—Chan, I'm coming down. Kennel the dogs. We don't need 'em. Come along, Strong."

Strong followed him, with a faint meed of admiration for the man, courageous enough to go hunting in the dark for the thing that, supposedly, had meant to kill him.

That meed merged in the realization that Fulke lusted for the kill. He boasted about his skill with his gun as they went downstairs.

"Always target on the eyes," he said. "Elephant, tiger or man. The eyes pick up the ray and glow like gems. *Crack!*—One is shattered, and the other goes out of itself."

Barry Ford met them at the foot of the stairs. Mary Carson was with him, in negligee, black hair flowing to her waist.

Fulke barked at Ford. "Stay out of this. Mary, you get back to bed."

A sudden gust of wind shivered through the trees, swaying the draperies of moss. It sent out a wave of jasmine scent.

Fulke had another and larger flash-torch, besides the one used as a sighting-beam on his gun. Its white beam probed through the murk, revealing boughs and vines in flat detail. The wind swooped again, and set the leaves to chattering, whispering secrets. A branch swung, not with the wind. In the prismatic circle of the torch-ray, Strong saw again the dark, leaping shape, still carrying the bundle on its back. Fulke gave a grunt, switched off his torch, set Strong aside with surprising strength, as Strong almost stumbled over him in the sudden change to total darkness.

"Treed him!" cried Fulke hoarsely. A needle of light spurted upward. It touched a barren, blasted bough; traveled to the fork where a humped shape squatted, two orbs glowing like emeralds.

Fulke chuckled, gloating and murderous.

Strong thrust at his arm as the Colonel pulled trigger. It was one thing to tree the man—to cow him and force him to come down—another deliberately to slaughter him.

"*Damn you!*" rasped Fulke, as the shot cracked like the lash of a whip.

Then the shape came hurtling out of the fork and fell upon Strong's shoulders, bearing him to the ground. Though wounded, the being was not

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badly hurt, and it fought with frenzied strength to get away.

Fulke's tiny ray played on the pair as they r o l l e d and wrestled on the ground amid the bast and acorns, inextricably entangled. He could not be sure which he might hit; and even in the midst of the twisting, straining combat, Strong wondered whether the Colonel would not let loose his bullets willy-nilly.

Strong was powerful and in good condition. He clung to the other to prevent him escaping, and then had to battle to d e f e n d himself from the hands that tore his pyjamas to ribbons, gripped at his throat. The man was completely naked and slippery with sweat. He gave off an acrid, musky smell, and he snapped and bit like a wild jungle beast.

IT was too fierce to last long. Strong knew his ju-jutsu, knew how to defend with sudden laxness followed with bursts of dynamic fury. But the other tore from his holds, with hot gasps of agony. In one wild flurry, they came to their knees, head to head, almost spent.

They started to rise. Strong's knees were gripped and he vised his left hand to the wet shoulder opposing it, his elbow grinding into the collarbone, arm crooked. His right forearm burrowed under the other's chin, and his right fingers made the lock, clasping his own left elbow. It was the strangle-hold, and Strong applied the twisting pressure until he swung the heavy, grunting body of his opponent over on his back, like a puncher bulldogging a steer.

The Colonel's torch splayed on black Ngaru, mother-naked, long-healed tribal weals on his misshapen but powerful body. There were later marks, red in the black skin, of claws and fangs. His breath came sobbingly. The bundle he had seemed to pack was his hump.

"Damn!" cried Fulke, "that was a fight!—Get up, you black dog!"

The eyes of Ngaru rolled up, the whites muddy and blood-flecked; pitiful, abject before the bloodthirsty fury in his master's voice. Had it been seventy years earlier, Fulke would have tortured this wretch; would have lashed him, at the triangles, to full confession. Yet there was no actual proof that he had committed, or even tried to commit, a crime.

"You handled him, Strong!" said the Colonel, with the approval of a patron toward a winning gladiator. "Now we'll get it out of him. It was *ju-ju*, after all!"

"You'll not get much out of him for a while," said Strong. "He's been clawed and bitten, and he's scared to death. He might get rabies or lion-fever from those claw-wounds.—And you hit him."

"I hope he rots!" said Fulke viciously, spurning the black and heaving body with his foot. "But you're right. We'll get him to quarters and treat him. I know something of medicine. I've got supplies. We'll fix him up."

His voice was still sadistic; a rasping purr.

Strong wondered whether the Gullah's brain would stand up under the experience. The smell that had come from him was f r o m glands excited with utter terror. Now he had collapsed. He might babble, in delirium, but in all probability his mental faculties had never been too strong.

It was a powerful urge that had sent him out after dark, risking the savage brutes he knew hated his scent.

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"Stay with him, Strong," said Fulke. "Don't let him get away. I'll round up somebody at the quarters to take him in."

He marched off, through the trees, his torch blazing a trail.

STRONG had dropped his shotgun when Ngaru dropped out of the tree, and had wrapped his legs about him. Now he picked the weapon up. There was little danger that the Negro would try to get away. Fulke had shot him through the lower jaw, and the bullet had come out through the cheek. Strong felt sorry for the poor devil. Like most of his race, when primitive, he had the mind of a child—illogical, charged with whimsies, easily swerved to love or hatred, devotion or mutiny.

The low moonlight filtered down upon the convulsively shuddering form until Fulke came back, bullying two frightened Negroes who carried a pallet between them .

"The dogs are kenneled, I tell you!" he snapped at them. "Take him to his room.—We'll come with you."

The Negroes were huddled in the main room of their quarters, beneath a ceiling lamp which burned kerosene and smoked and stank. As yet, the old barracoon had not been wired for electricity.

Women rocked and moaned. The big, doelike eyes of the mulatto, Melissy, rolled as she comforted the yellow-skinned boy beside her. Baba, the one-eyed conjure-woman, her skin as shaggy as an alligator's hide, squatted like a bag of bones set against the wall, chanted in a monotone.

Strong ordered water made hot on a brick stove, where a fire was still glowing. The glances of the Gullahs avoided Fulke, towering in the doorway, a brocaded dressing-gown corded about him, his gun in hand. Only Baba's one malignant orb regarded him while she intoned her charm, for good or evil.

They patched Ngaru up, his wounds were made antiseptic, for the time at least.

On the way back to the house Fulke swung aside, leading the way to where he had stumbled over the dead body of one of the dogs, on his way to the quarters. Its tongue lolled from the open, stiffened jaws, its eyes protruded.

"Strangled," said Fulke. "It was just as well you got Ngaru in that hold.—Can you imagine what chance I'd have against him, once his hands were at my throat?"

It was a wonder, Strong thought, that Ngaru had not had the belly ripped out of him by the dog. He had grappled with the mastiff as it leaped for him out of the dark; but he had squeezed the life out of it in a deadly tussle. Self-defense, for Ngaru.

Strong looked at the dead dog's claws. They seemed clean, but either they or the animal's teeth might infect Ngaru. The bullet wound, also, might bring on tetanus. Clearly, the black needed better treatment than they could give him; but there was no way to procure it before morning, if then.

Strong took a bath and changed to fresh pyjamas; but he could not sleep. He did not expect to, during the next forty-eight hours. Fulke had taken a sedative, deliberately announcing that he was now in Strong's hands, and seeming to feel that, with the capture of Ngaru, the menace was broken.

Strong did not agree with him.

But Fulke had seemed weak after the excitement. His high blood-pressure sapped his strength, and Strong

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was relieved to hear him lightly snoring.

STRONG sat by the open window. The silence of the night was now intense; the slightest sound was magnified. He was sure he saw a nebulous glow that barely illuminated the ground, but which must come from within the house. Then it vanished; and straining his ears, Strong believed he heard the click of a lock, followed by a light footfall.

He took his own torch and went softly down the stairs.

There was somebody in the library; the faintest of sounds betrayed them. Strong pushed back the door, that was ajar. Some one had slid aside the section of shelving, and was fiddling with the safe. The circle of light that played on the combination showed slim fingers at work on the dial. Only one person at Fulke Manor had a hand like that —a woman's hand, the hand of Mary Carson.

She must have just entered. Her fingers spun the disk, back and forth. But the door did not spring open, and Strong could hear no click of falling tumblers.

Presently she gave a sigh, and the concealing section swung back into place. She must have failed. In a light negligee, like a ghost, she moved toward the door, seen dimly when she was opposite the tall windows.

Strong had not switched on his own torch. He started to retreat up the stairs, convinced the girl had not opened the safe, even though she must have tried.

Something moved on the landing, as he reached it. A figure that was noiseless—felt, rather than seen or heard.

Strong's one thought was to protect the girl; at least until he could determine what to do about discovering her. Equally, he did not want any one else to know of her attempt.

This sudden chivalry on his part was as unusual as it was spontaneous. Mary Carson would have to come upstairs, to her own sleeping quarters. The way must be made clear.

Then the phantomlike presence moved toward him, and he grappled with it, not caring much who it was for the moment, intent upon giving the girl a chance to make her escape, to be warned at least.

His fingers slid over smooth silk, encountering sinews of steel that suddenly tensed. He smelled a faint suggestion of sandalwood.

"Who you?" came the whisper.

It was Chan Lung.

Strong whispered back. He drew Chan into his own suite, and switched on a shaded lamp. Chan stood there in his black garb, as if he had slept in it or had never gone to bed. Calmly he laid down a long-bladed knife on a table. It had a carved, ivory handle. His face was inscrutable.

"I thought I heard somebody, Chan," said Strong. "It must have been you."

Something flickered in the jetty orbs; it might have been the ghost of a smile.

"Not me.—Somebody else," said Chan. "You no see?"

"No. I must have been mistaken," Strong answered. But he knew that Chan knew he lied.

"I think I heah somebody too," said Chan. "But I no see."

Strong wondered. What had Chan wanted on the landing, with that knife?

"You like something?" asked the *comprador*. "Mebbe can catch dlink."

"No, thanks," said Strong. "*Maskee*, Chan."

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In their guarded talks, they were like two fencers, in the dark, their blades crossing, sliding, feinting, guarding...

CHAPTER IV.

A CLOSED SAFE.

STRONG went past the screen between the two rooms, soon after he awakened. Fulke was no longer snoring, but sleeping peacefully. He did not look too well; his high-colored flesh was waxen in quality, as if his heart no longer fed it properly, and as if only the ancient burn of the sun sustained a mask of health.

It was close to eight o'clock. Early morning sunshine flooded the garden, and birds were caroling. The chase of last night seemed like a nightmare.

Strong walked across the room silently, on thick rugs, as a light knock came at the door. That door was neither locked nor bolted, as he told himself it should be. He doubted if the one who knocked expected the Colonel to open the door; therefore they must imagine that it was not fastened.

Strong chided himself. That was carelessness. Whether or not the black man who had strangled a great dog fled through the trees, and fought like Caliban for freedom, meant Fulke ill, or whether evil might come from within the manor, the old man should be better guarded.

Chan stood outside, as Strong pulled back the door; Chan, now in whites, impeccable and almost bland, save for the continual mockery of his hooded eyes. He held a silver salver on which was a tall glass.

Strong shut the door behind him.

"It might be better to let Colonel Fulke rest this morning," he said.

Chan blinked his eyelids.

"When he wake, he like lemon juice in soda wateh, befo' he take medicine for heart," he said. "Suppose he no take medicine, not feel so good."

Strong hesitated. There was a low sound, as if something soft had fallen, within the room; then a creak of the bed, and Fulke's voice in angry exclamation.

Strong and Chan entered together. Fulke was sitting up against his pillows; his face was flushed crimson.

"Take that damned thing away!" he said querulously. "It just came in through the window. It's not dead yet, and it clipped at me just now.—By the fires of hell!" he said. "Do they think they are going to scare *me* with their mumbo-jumbo?"

It was a bat, the body and head like that of a mouse, its leathery wings outspread, with a spur at the top. It lay on its belly, trying to claw a feeble way over the coverlet. Suddenly it rolled over upon its back with a tiny squeak, the membranes of the wings wrinkled about it like a shroud.

For the first time, Strong saw Chan disturbed beneath his placid surface. His lips drew back and showed his teeth.

"Bat no good!" he muttered.

Fulke laughed, but to Strong the laugh sounded forced.

"You no like, Chan?" bantered the Colonel.

STRONG picked up the little flying mammal. He knew many races who abominated and feared the "flittermice," linking them up as messengers of evil—suckers of souls as well as bodies.

"*Maskee,*" said Chan.

He gave the Colonel his drink and took a metal box of tablets from the

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drawer of a night-table. Fulke swallowed the pellet, drained the glass. Almost immediately his color was more natural.

Strong looked out the window. It struck him that an active man, like Ngaru, could reach the balcony from the nearest tree tops. It would be a Tarzan-like achievement, but it could be done.

Equally, the bat might have been tossed from there, or even from below, by anybody who could aim accurately. He was sure the bat had not flown in at this hour; it had been dying when it landed on the bed.

Ngaru could not be blamed for this, however.

"If I thought it was one of those damned blacks, I'd have his hide off!" said Fulke vehemently. "Well, Strong, this is the last day, but one, of grace. Then there'll be no more bats—unless they pass for birds in hell. I fear I'll hardly qualify for heaven.—I'm a bit tired," he added. "I think I'll get up about noon.—Tea, Chan; dry toast; one poached egg; and a strip of bacon. See to it yourself, Chan. By heaven, I'll go on a diet until to-morrow, midnight. I'll eat nothing but what Chan himself cooks for me. Then at least, if I'm poisoned, you'll know who to blame."

"Can do!" answered Chan, showing no trace of resentment. "I catch. I bling in egg from chicken house myself," he said, with what might have been a flicker of humor.

Strong slipped the bat into his pocket. For the present he resolved to say nothing about his previous night's adventure with the girl, the safe, and Chan. It was pretty clear that Fulke, stiff though he might be, was beginning to be more than annoyed by these "sendings."

"Take a look at Ngaru, will you, Strong?" he asked. "Can't have him die on us until we find what he was up to."

Strong nodded. "Bolt your door, and those windows, to-night," he said. "I'll leave my window open; you'll get air enough"

"*Rung ho?*" asked Fulke.

Strong had enough Hindustani to understand. "It's an order," he repeated in English.

It seemed there was no special hour for breakfast at Fulke Manor. Strong found the saddle-colored Negro waiting in the dining room. The man bowed, and held his chair, smiling.

"It be a fine day, sah," he said in Gullah dialect. "Missy Cahson, she done eat. Massah Fo'd, he not come yet.—We got buck shad, an' waffle, scramble aig, ham, bacon, hot roll..."

It was impossible to associate this grinning boy with intrigue or tragedy. Yet he had stood spellbound in the quarters, the night before, while Baba chanted and the Colonel glowered over the injured Ngaru.

Strong knew blacks well enough, east and west and south. They were as impressionable as soft wax; and like soft wax, the tablet of their mind could smooth out again and hold no trace of what had been scribed there an hour before. Nevertheless, it remained just as receptive; their memories clicked with their emotions rather than their reasoning.

"Bring me shad and waffles," Strong decided.

His appetite was good.—He wondered what Mary Carson had eaten.

HE was enjoying a second cup of coffee when Barry Ford came in and nodded to him sullenly. He seemed to be in one of the secretive

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and resentful moods which Fulke had mentioned—a man at enmity with all the world, except perhaps with Mary Carson. Brooding and baleful. Strong began to understand more clearly why the girl had parted so abruptly with Ford the night before.

Ford barked his order at the servant, dabbed at the food when it came, and shoved it away untasted, save for the coffee, which he gulped down, ordering more.

"Get out, *and stay out,*" he ordered when the boy brought it. He took out a cigarette case.

To Strong's surprise, he offered him a cigarette, which Strong accepted.

Ford inhaled deeply.

"You going to see that ape, Ngaru?" he asked.

"Yes."

"If you don't mind, I'll go with you.—Look here, Strong, I belittled this *ju-ju* stuff yesterday. The Colonel's right, of course; I haven't had your experience, or his. But I know these blacks fairly well. I've read up quite a bit. I got a message myself, this morning.—Damn it, man, it was under my pillow, still alive!"

"What?"

Strong knew, even as he asked. He was not at all astonished to see what Ford brought from the pocket of the dressing gown in which he had elected to come to breakfast. It was another bat, wrapped in cotton—as a naturalist would wrap it, Strong told himself.

He said nothing of the one which he still carried on him.

"It's a *noctilio,*" said Ford. "Bit far north for the species, but they sometimes breed in the Carolinas. I'm something of a naturalist, Strong, but I am not interested in bats, even though they represent a mammal, placental creature, that existed back in the Eocene Era. I like them even less when I find them under my pillow, still living, although they have been pierced through the heart with a needle.—Take a look at it."

Strong, a little repugnantly, examined the bat. It was spitted with a sliver of steel that might have been a needle, the eye missing.

He gave it back to Ford.

"What do *you* make of it?" he asked.

"It looks as if they were after me, as well as the Colonel. Why, I don't know—except that I'm his distant kin. And the blacks are back of it. Melissy and that brat of hers.—It's not the sort of thing one picks to talk about. Still, the Colonel makes no bones about it. He's been a promiscuous sort, and I imagine Melissy was mighty attractive a few years ago."

Strong looked steadily at Barry Ford. In a sense, the man was fouling his own nest; but it was plain that the subject was a painful one. The hurt of it showed in his eyes and his twitching lips.

"Her grandmother—that old witch Baba. She's started this thing. They all know that the Colonel has a poor heart, overworked. He lived too high, in earlier years. Blood-pressure doesn't convey anything to these Negroes, however; they are trying to scare him to death.—They might poison him, though I doubt it. Those things are too easily traced—even their pet killer. But that old hag knows enough to figure that he might have a fatal heart attack, if it was only from rage. Then she and her brat would get their money.—I'm being confidential with you, Strong. I don't get that way, as a rule. Only, this is a question of life and death."

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"I wouldn't say anything to Colonel Fulke about this, if I were you," Strong said. "He wasn't feeling too well this morning. Chan is looking after him."

Ford leaned across the table, his eyes gleaming.

"Do you trust Chan, Strong? I don't. He's down in the Colonel's will for a whole lot of money—for a Chinaman," he added significantly.

Strong thought of what Fulke had said. He repeated it, almost word for word, as his own sentiments.

"In my business, I don't trust anybody, Ford. Sometimes I'm pretty doubtful even about myself. If you're through with your breakfast, suppose we go and take a look at Ngaru?"

NGARU was doing well enough in body. He had a temperature, but his hurts showed no sign of infection. There was no tendency to lockjaw.

Old Baba sat close to him, fanning flies away, regarding the two white men with the scorn backed by generations of belief in charms and the placations of heathen gods.

But Ngaru's mind was disordered. Its contents were like the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle that has been spilled upon the floor. His low moans were mental rather than physical. On the brick stove a pot simmered and smelled of herbs. Baba sat like a discredited but contemptuous sybil.

There was little more they could do, beyond the record of the clinical thermometer, furnished by Ford.

"I might as well go to my lab—my general workshop, atelier, or what you care to call it," he said. "Want to look it over?"

Strong was curious enough to go with him. From the point of view of magic, he did not take much stock in the *ju-ju* symbols, if they were *ju-ju*. He was inclined to regard them as red herrings, dragged across a devious, hidden trail. At the end of that trail deadly danger probably lay in wait. But they might be declarations of intention, calculated not only to break down the resistance of the intended victim, but to bolster the spirits of the would-be executioners.

Ford's workshop had once been the outside kitchen to the manor house, connected with a covered gallery that had been eliminated. It was a roomy place, paved with stone, its walls also of coquina cement in which bright flecks of nacre shone.

It had a skylight. At one end, a door led to the lean-to that sheltered the lighting plant. There was a bench with a vise, a lathe, and a saw, all run by power. Many tools, in a rack. Sections of pipe, odds and ends of metal, and some electrical equipment.

Ford, it seemed, did a little wood-carving, also some modeling in clay. There were specimens of taxidermy, well done, Strong thought. There was a sink, bottles on shelves, an array of retorts, crucibles, test tubes, and other chemical paraphernalia.

"A Jack-of-all-trades, you see," grinned Ford.

He was quite affable. His sullen mood seemed to have passed.

He tossed the dead bat on a table, and suddenly he swung about. Without a sound, Chan had come to the doorway and was now standing there, gazing in with his expressionless eyes. His body had screened the sunlight, casting a shadow on the stone floor.

"What do *you* want, you slinking Chink?" demanded Ford. "I told you to keep out of here, to stay away from here!"

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"Wood box empty," replied Chan Lung evenly, though his eyes seemed to glint darkly like the scraps of nacre in the walls. "I think you like say what kind the boy use, all time."

"I'll attend to it. Clear out!" said Ford.

Chan's look seemed to rest upon the dead bat. Then he glided away.

"Damned, s n o o p i n g, sneaking Chink!" Ford stormed. "You're on the job here, Strong. Don't overlook *that* bet. Plenty of motive there, and lots of devilishly clever ways of killing.—Bamboo shreds of vegetable silica, sharp as needle points, working through the intestines. Almost impossible to discover, even in autopsy.—The Colonel has told me about them. I understand they can feed them, and tell to a nicety just when they will kill—to a day."

Strong nodded. "They sell such things in open market in the East," he said. "Tiger's whiskers, too. And arsenic. Call it magic. *Guna-guna*. Malaysian, not Chinese."

"The Chinks have *bufonetin*, taken from toad glands."

Barry Ford seemed fairly well posted on Oriental poisons, Strong thought. All races had their mysterious, and often indetectable, philters. Calabar bean, extract of the mock yellow jasmine that grew close by. Most of them having a powerful effect on the heart. And Chan was cooking for Fulke.

HE left Ford and went to the main house. Fulke was still dozing. Strong heard, somewhere, the swift tapping of a typewriter. But he did not see Mary Carson until dinner time, after Ford and he had had their sherry-and-bitters with the Colonel, who seemed in good spirits.

Again, after the meal, Ford lit a fire. But this time he did not leave. The girl was also in the library. Chan served coffee and liqueurs; cheroots were lit by the men. Mary Carson seemed to enjoy a cigarette. As Chan Lung set down the bottle of precious peach brandy and left them, they sat in silence for a little while.

The fire gently shifted; it changed hues like a chameleon, sending out its woody blends of perfume. The Colonel lifted his glass.

"*Morituri te* . . ." he began, but stopped with a laugh. "Who should I salute, if I *am* about to die?" he asked. "Not the living, for by the time thirty hours have passed I may have so immeasurably the advantage of them the salutation might be a jeer. Or there may be oblivion. Let us drink to Life. While it lasts, make the most of it.—A pagan toast.—But I myself have lived."

Strong held no doubt of that, as he saw Fulke's spare figure, erect in front of his fireplace, and giving out an aura of vigor and dominance. It was his job to keep Fulke living. Therefore, in a little while, he said to the Colonel:

"You spoke to me of a will that I understand is known, as to its contents, by everybody now inside the walls of the manor. By which I mean the outer walls, of course."

"No doubt of it," said Fulke. "The document is now in my safe. I showed you that, Strong."

"You did not show me the will, however. I should like to have a look at it."

The firelight flickered. Fulke did not like electric light in his library, save for one shaded lamp by which he read or worked. That was unlit.

Candles glowed s o f t l y. Strong watched. The girl lit a fresh cigarette. Barry Ford cleared his cheroot of

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ashes. Vague shadows played across their faces.

FULKE cleared his throat.

"Of course," he said. "Of course."

He seemed a trifle surprised, and vaguely annoyed.

"My lawyers in Charleston have a copy," he added.

"But that one is not signed, and it is therefore valueless," Strong put in.

He looked steadily at the girl. She should have felt his intent glance, but if she did she masked it by lighting another cigarette. The additional gleam of the lamp showed her features, cameo-like. Strong had a notion that Ford was also regarding her closely.

Fulke reached inside the shelving. The section slid aside. He fiddled with the combination.

Strong offered to bring a candle, and Fulke accepted. Three times he tried to set the dial so that the tumblers would clear the lock.

"My memory is not what it was," he murmured, plainly vexed. "Mary, you have the combination. Where did you put it?"

"It is underneath the last leaf of your blotter," she replied. "Between that and the leather. I'll get it for you."

Fulke studied the figures, carefully placed them. But the safe mysteriously refused to open.

"That is damned funny!" he said. "Perhaps you put them down wrong, Mary.—Ford, do you remember them?"

"I never knew them, sir," answered Ford. "I have seen you open up once or twice, when you were good enough to put some of my trash inside—native corundum and spinel, ruby, matrix—But I never marked the combination," he finished.

Strong wondered whether he slightly overdid his negation.

The girl spoke up.

"We used this notation last time, Colonel Fulke, when you were not sure yourself."

"Quite right, quite right," said Fulke, testily. "Barry, I don't suppose you can open a closed safe, among your other abilities?"

"Hardly, Colonel."

"Then we'll send in to Charleston for a man. Hardly time at that—before to-morrow midnight. Well, we'll not bother with that. Let's talk of other things."

For two hours, while the fire gradually burned low, he entertained them with tales of his adventuring. A flame ran through it all; a fire that sometimes warmed them to him but oftener seemed devastating. Fulke had lived, there was no doubt of that, and he had helped himself without regard to others' appetites or wishes. There was a Mephistophelean flavor to all his odyssey. The world had been his oyster.

He stood up at last, and dismissed the girl and Ford.

"Live if you can, love while you may, and leave before all burns to ash," he said. "Strong, let's go to bed. I shall bolt my door and latch my windows, holding you responsible till morning."

When they were upstairs and he was in bed, after Strong had made sure the locks were fast, Fulke spoke again.

"Why did you want to look at my will, Strong?" he said.

"I thought it might be missing, or that the combination had been changed."

"Ha!—Well, to-morrow night I shall make a new will, a holographic one, and I shall give it to *you* to keep,

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Strong.—You have a fitting name for a guardian. Good night."

CHAPTER V.

LAST DAY.

IT was the twenty-eighth, Fulke's last day of grace. Nothing happened out of the way. Ngaru was improving, but his brain was still dull. Baba still scowled.

Only Melissy said anything, after Strong had looked at Ngaru's hurts.

"Garry not do wrong," she said. "He only try to do good. But this is not a place for good. Garry is brave man; and because he is brave, he is hurt. Baba speak you are smart, she say you come to find the truth. Last night she throw the bones. She try to help. Me, too—Melissy. Because of *this*."

She touched her boy on the head, where the hair grew straight, and she looked directly at Strong. At the moment she was sincere, he was sure of that, but her spirit rested on mingled, troubled tides.

On the plea of duty, Mary Carson avoided Strong, which was easy. The Colonel napped. Ford chopped wood. Chan was invisible, except for the performance of his obvious duties, yet Strong was conscious of him all the while.

At dinner, Colonel Fulke stared as the saddle-colored boy removed his service plate. Then he laughed shortly.

"Behold the writing—not on the wall, but laid upon the cloth," he said. "'*Mene, mene, tekel upharsin.*'—'I have been weighed in the balances, and found wanting.'—It may be, sooth!"

Upon the square of cheap paper there were no Hebrew characters such as appeared upon the walls of Nebuchadnezzar's palace. It was just a leaf from a calendar, announcing that it was: THURSDAY, 28 FEBRUARY, 1934.

"I should like to be alone in the library for a while," he said. "I shall be through before midnight, Strong. That, I believe, is the witching hour. I shall lock the door until I am through; the windows have bolts, top and bottom, besides the catches. And I shall be armed. — But I prefer to be alone. When I am finished with what I have to do, you may take complete charge of me. Until then, you are not responsible."

His tone was irrevocable. Strong accepted the order; however, he meant to be at hand.

"I'll fix the fire," said Ford.

"Thanks, my boy," replied Fulke.

Barry Ford stared at the Colonel, as if surprised at so affectionate a phrase. Then he left, to come back presently to the dining room where the rest still sat and announce that the fire was blazing.

Fulke left them.

"How about a game of chess?" Ford asked the girl.

"I'm not in the humor to-night," she said. She looked at Strong. "Would you like a stroll?" she asked.

He shook his head. It was not so much that he remembered the episode of the jasmine and the deadly snake; but he saw her catch her breath, and knew that she remembered, regretting what she had just spoken.

"I'm on duty," he said, "until midnight."

"I'm sorry, I did not mean—I did not think," she faltered.

"Settle it between yourselves," said Barry Ford. "I'll potter about a bit in my shop."

They were left alone, Strong and the girl.

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"You saw me—at the safe?" she said.

He nodded.

"I can explain."

"There is no need of that, for the present," he told her.

She gave him a half-frightened look and fled upstairs.

It was eight o'clock.

STRONG looked to his gun. He took a seat in a carved chair, with arms that ended in lion's claws, where he could watch the door of the library. Beneath that showed a line of light.

The house grew quiet. The servants had gone to their quarters. All save the *comprador,* Chan, on his own errands. A clock ticked somewhere in the great hall, and presently it struck ten.

Suddenly Barry Ford appeared, coming from the back of the house. He was in his shirt sleeves, and he seemed to be highly agitated.

"I came along the veranda," he said, "and looked in through the windows to the library. I thought the fire might need fixing. There's something wrong with the Colonel. He looks as if he had had a stroke.—And the door is locked; he *said* he'd lock it. Damn it, Strong, get *in* there!"

His excitement was convincing. The menace had struck.

Strong threw himself at the door; but it was well made, and he could not budge it.

"I'll try the window," Ford cried, and sped away.

Chan, in black, came gliding from the upper landing as Strong again tried to force the lock or break one of the stout panels.

"I catch ax," said Chan.

He showed that he knew there was emergency.

There came a crash of glass, repeated. Ford was smashing through the fastened windows.

Then Chan reappeared, with an ax and a short crowbar.

"This mo' betteh, I think," he said, handing Strong the lever.

Strong wrenched the door open. A draft sped from the smashed windows to the hearth, sending the embers leaping. Something flared on them.

Strong leaped to where Fulke slumped in his chair beside the table, Ford bending over him. There was no sign of written papers in front of him.

"He's gone," said Ford. "Heart attack—blood-pressure. Or else—?"

He lurched into Strong as the investigator made for the fireplace, but Strong shook him off and caught up the pronged devil-iron, raking the flaming paper clear. He heard Ford cry out, and turned to see Chan, standing with his long-bladed knife pressing its sharp point a little below Ford's collar bone.

"Hold him," Strong said.

"Can do," quietly.

Fulke was dead. There was no doubt of that. His face was purple, livid. The strong draft swept through from window to hearth and sent ashes whirling up the chimney. There was a taint in the air; but it faded as Strong sniffed at it, not yet placing it.

MARY CARSON came through the open door. Wrapped in a negligee, pallid as a lily. She had heard the shattering of door and windows.

"What is the meaning of this damned outrage?" demanded Ford. "If Colonel Fulke is dead, I am the master here. Stand back, you yellow devil!"

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"Mebbe," said Chan. "I like you speak why you make hollow place in log—all same log for fiehplace. Too *much* I watch."

"It looks as if you wanted to get in the room first, Ford," said Strong, "while I was still breaking in the door. Probably you wanted to burn these papers. They might be a holographic will, to take the place of the one you took from the safe—even though you say you don't remember the combination.—I think I'll take a look at the hearth. I see the back log is not completely burned."

There was a gasp from the girl.

Chan pricked Ford with his knife, and Ford subsided.

"I hollowed the log to make a place for chemicals," said Ford. "Copper and zinc chloride. The Colonel liked to see the colors in the flames."

Strong prodded at the charred back log, broke it up. A half-fused pipe of metal showed.

"You've studied, Ford," he said. "And the Orient can yet learn from the Occident. Still, this has been done before. A section of a metal cylinder, partially perforated, and containing cyanide in one half and sulphuric acid in the other. When the fire smelts the soft metal, the two combine and the most deadly of gases spurts through the holes. You smashed the windows to make the draft and so clear the room before the rest of us entered. But it also stopped the complete melting of your cylinder."

"Damn you, Strong!" said Ford. "I tried to get rid of you, when I planted that snake in the fork, and suggested we needed more flowers. You win! I hang!—But I played for big stakes. This day is the day my mother died. She wrote a letter to Fulke, now sitting dead in that chair. She did not live to seal it or mail it. But I read it.—I am his son. He would not give her his name—nor me. So I killed him.

"He did not think I knew, when he sought me out and adopted me. I meant to get his money.—I wanted something else. But I was tainted. Perhaps he told her; perhaps I sensed it. I mean *you*, Mary.—You win, Strong, damn you! I've seen you look at her, and her at you. Now go and get the coroner and the sheriff.—I killed him, I tell you, and I'm glad of it!"

THE light of intelligence had returned to the eyes of Ngaru.

"I was afraid of the dogs, yes," he said to the sheriff. "But I wanted to be sure who was using *ju-ju* signs; who had tried to make out it was *my* folk. So I go out that night, an' the dog spring on me. Then I take to tree.—But *my* folk never mean fo' Cunnel Fulke to die!"

"Don't worry," said the sheriff.

"Death an' life," old Baba crooned. "Man an' woman jine—an' life go on. Melissy. You an' her," she said, pointing to Strong and Mary Carson. "I see all dat. Cunnel, he die. Fohd, bimeby *he* die.—But Life go on."

Strong found Mary Carson's fingers twining in his own.

"I changed the combination," she said. "I did not know that Barry had stolen the will, but I was afraid that he might. He wanted me to marry him; I did not love him. I could not—"

After all, Strong thought, it might be white magic; and Mary Carson seemed to agree with him.

The scent of jasmine stole through the dawn. Somewhere a mocking bird was singing.

THE END

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MEN OF DARING

by Stookie Allen

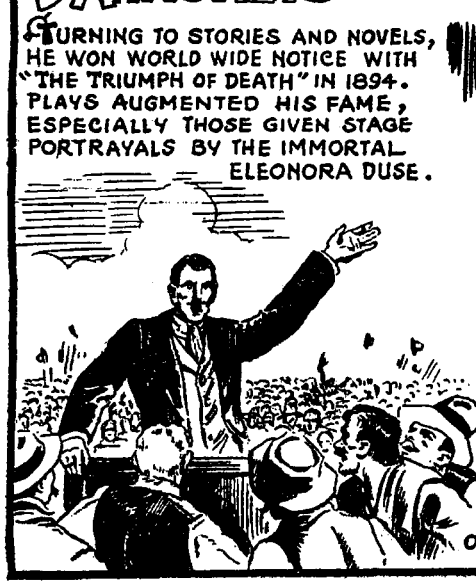
ITALY'S FIGHTING POET

Italy's leading literary figure, Gabriele D'Annunzio, will always be remembered as the author-patriot who, forsaking his pen for the sword, performed heroic exploits for love of his fatherland.

GABRIELE D'ANNUNZIO

BORN GAETANO RAPAGNETTO IN 1864 NEAR PESCARA, ITALY, HE TOOK THE PEN NAME D'ANNUNZIO AND SOLD HIS FIRST PIECE OF POETRY AT THE AGE OF 15 AS A STUDENT IN THE COLLEGE OF PRATO. A BOOK OF VERSE WAS PUBLISHED A YEAR LATER UPON HIS ENTERING THE UNIVERSITY OF ROME.

TURNING TO STORIES AND NOVELS, HE WON WORLD WIDE NOTICE WITH "THE TRIUMPH OF DEATH" IN 1894. PLAYS AUGMENTED HIS FAME, ESPECIALLY THOSE GIVEN STAGE PORTRAYALS BY THE IMMORTAL ELEONORA DUSE.



FOR SOME YEARS THE POET LIVED IN PARIS. HE HAD MARRIED AND THEN BECOME SEPARATED FROM THE PRINCESS DI GALLESE. THEN CAME THE WORLD WAR. D'ANNUNZIO RETURNED TO ITALY TO LOOSE TORRENTS OF ELOQUENCE ADVOCATING THE ALLIED CAUSE.

A True Story in Pictures Every Week

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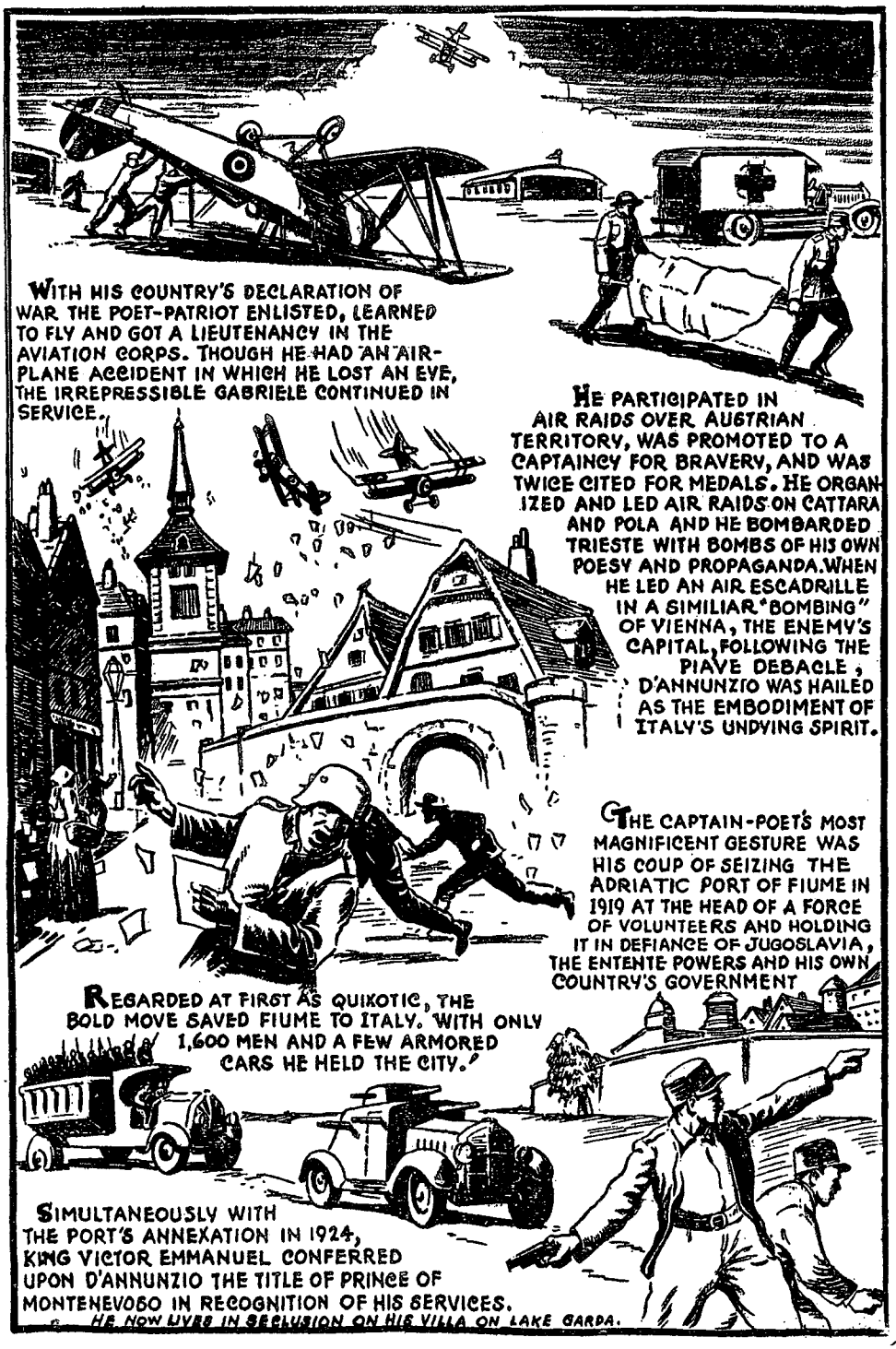
WITH HIS COUNTRY'S DECLARATION OF WAR THE POET-PATRIOT ENLISTED, LEARNED TO FLY AND GOT A LIEUTENANCY IN THE AVIATION CORPS. THOUGH HE HAD AN AIR-PLANE ACCIDENT IN WHICH HE LOST AN EYE, THE IRREPRESSIBLE GABRIELE CONTINUED IN SERVICE.
HE PARTICIPATED IN AIR RAIDS OVER AUSTRIAN TERRITORY, WAS PROMOTED TO A CAPTAINCY FOR BRAVERY, AND WAS TWICE CITED FOR MEDALS. HE ORGANIZED AND LED AIR RAIDS ON CATTARA AND POLA AND HE BOMBARDED TRIESTE WITH BOMBS OF HIS OWN POESY AND PROPAGANDA. WHEN HE LED AN AIR ESCADRILLE IN A SIMILIAR "BOMBING" OF VIENNA, THE ENEMY'S CAPITAL, FOLLOWING THE PIAVE DEBACLE, D'ANNUNZIO WAS HAILED AS THE EMBODIMENT OF ITALY'S UNDYING SPIRIT.
THE CAPTAIN-POET'S MOST MAGNIFICENT GESTURE WAS HIS COUP OF SEIZING THE ADRIATIC PORT OF FIUME IN 1919 AT THE HEAD OF A FORCE OF VOLUNTEERS AND HOLDING IT IN DEFIANCE OF JUGOSLAVIA, THE ENTENTE POWERS AND HIS OWN COUNTRY'S GOVERNMENT
REGARDED AT FIRST AS QUIXOTIC, THE BOLD MOVE SAVED FIUME TO ITALY. WITH ONLY 1,600 MEN AND A FEW ARMORED CARS HE HELD THE CITY.
SIMULTANEOUSLY WITH THE PORT'S ANNEXATION IN 1924, KING VICTOR EMMANUEL CONFERRED UPON D'ANNUNZIO THE TITLE OF PRINCE OF MONTENEVOSO IN RECOGNITION OF HIS SERVICES.
HE NOW LIVES IN SEPLUSION ON HIS VILLA ON LAKE GARDA.

Next Week: Bertram Thomas, Modern Marco Polo

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Strong Man

By THEODORE ROSCOE

Samson the carnival wrestler, like the hero whose name he used, had one fatal weakness

SING the saga of Samuel Clements Jackson who weighed in at two hundred ten and smoked so many cigarettes.

"Hey, look! *Heyah! Heyaaah!* It's the best show onna midway, my friends—it's Samson, the *strong* man—World's wrestling *champ*-pion and *strong*-gest man alive!"

Above the pop, tonk and clang, the carousal operetta and mechanical agitations, the peanuts, odors, hats, flags of the Greater Lemuel B. Gooker Carnival Shows, the voice of Foghorn Kelly loosed a parade of words that marched down the midway in the gaudy robes of ballyhoo; words that beguiled ear and eye, man and boy, and echoed finally into the tent where the world's wrestling champion and strongest living man sat hunched on a bucket with fingers in his hair.

"Step in close, folks, you red-blooded gents who are interested in sports, atheletics and physical *cul*-cheer—have a look!—come see Samson! There he stands, there he stands on that poster behind me *exactly* as you'll see him stand before you. Notice the muscles, sinews, biceps *and* thews.

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Observe the shoulders, the powerful thighs and puissant hands! Samson the champion wrestler, the strongest man in the worllllld—"

Something akin to a seismic disturbance tremored through the shoulders, powerful thighs and puissant hands belonging to the subject of this eulogy; the crows of gloom had left their footprints on his brow. Swinging angrily, he slapped shut the tent flap, tuning the oration to a faint mumbo-jumbo; then raised rueful eyes to the tinsel-clad figure standing against the canvas wall.

"Geez, Roberta, it's no use. I can't stand it any more."

Roberta Roberti, the Lady with the Radio Eyes, leaned on a peeling blue tent pole, smoothed a small frown from her forehead with the back of a hand, and regarded the drooping giant with maternal indignance.

"Sam, what *is* the matter?"

"I—I'm sick of it."

"Who isn't? But what have *you* got to kick about?"

He rubbed an egg of muscle on his forearm; a sigh expanded his naked chest as he reached for his belt to smoke another cigarette. Wind stirred the tent flap, letting in the voice of Foghorn Kelly on a smell of stale straw. "—Each an' every an' *any* comer. Yes, sir, anybody at-tall. Anybody inna audience want to wrestle Samson, you sports, you athletes, you gamy gentlemen, here's your chance to make the big time! And that's his challenge to you, folks; a chance to win *twenty*-fi' dollars cash prize to th' man among you who lasts a half hour, thirty minutes in the ring with Samson or throws him *once* to the mat—"

"Listen to it," he snarled at his feet. His first drag consumed the cigarette half way, and he ground it against the tent pole, his whole expression hangdog. "Just listen to all that bunk. Strongest man in the world. Wrestling champ. Me! A stumble bum like me—"

THE Lady with the Radio Eyes made an impatient gesture. Her eyes were nice. Blue and warm, even when angered or puzzled. "Listen to me, Sam. You keep calling yourself a bum and pretty soon I'll believe it."

He was fixing a third cigarette into an apologetic grin. "I never asked you to believe anything else, Bobbie. Don't bother about me. I tell you—I'm washed up, I guess."

She shook her head, tumbling dark fingerwaves. "Don't be this way. Who of us isn't washed up, I want to know. But we're lucky to have even rotten jobs like these in times like this, aren't we?"

He shrugged unhappily, staring at charred butts floating in a dish of water. "You ought to be ashamed," she went on in sudden vehemence, frowning down at his tousled scalp. "My goodness, how'd you like to be a girl stuck in the mud with an outfit like this. Study to be a ballet dancer an' end up busted in a tent show, with no chance of getting out, either. I'm not kicking for myself. It's just I hate to see a man like you play possum on yourself. I—"

"That's it," he reproached himself. "If I was worth anything I'd of got you out of it long ago. Some day I'll—" But the jut went out of his jaw at the hope, and he blew a wrathful gust at his shoes. "I tell you," he said angrily, "I'm no good."

"Look at you," she blazed. "Look at the great big likes of you. Strong as a giant. Lick any ten men you know of. And mope around like a baby just

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because you once lost a championship match in New York—"

He lifted a hand as if to fend it off, but the girl's quickened voice kept on going. "I know your story, and I've been trying to buck you up ever since you joined this mud opera five months ago. You say you hate it. Whyn't you quit it, then? Go out and get a job."

"Yeah. Breadline. I'd do anything if there's a chance—"

"I don't mean a day laborer. You don't have to. Go back to wrestling, Sam. All you need is to try."

"Bobbie, I'd—if you only understood about—" Words blurted to his lips, but he caught them back on the inhale. Somehow he couldn't tell the girl. Anyway, it was too late now. He couldn't break the only faith some one had left in him. "I can't, that's all," he snapped.

She was stooping to tie the stained lace of a dancing slipper, her dark head close to his. It made him wince at the glimpse of the frail shoulder where the kimona slipped down, pale with the evening cold; made him crush his fingers together.

"You're a marvelous wrestler," she was telling him. "Why, the way you can throw these big yokels, night after night, one right after another—and then you're afraid of yourself. No wonder—smoking all the time, the way you do. Honestly, Sam, you're just ruining yourself. You smell like a tobacco store, and it's enough to make anybody go stale—" Her eyes brightened with accusation. "That's it. All this smoking!"

The bucket creaked as he stood up slowly, lazily soaring to tower over her, six feet two of shamefaced, uneasy discouragement. "Bad habit," he admitted. "But I'll never get into the game again, so what's the difference. Don't you bother that pretty head no more about me, kid. I been wanting to tell you."

"Say! Say, what the devil *is* this?"

THE interrupting demand came from the back of the tent. Samson the Strong Man, and the Lady with the Radio Eyes turned at the intrusion. The curtain parted to admit a gaunt man in green stripes and straw hat, the type of human strung on wires so that his gestures seemed quick as bird-jerks, and his eyes, like black currants imbedded under a scowl, flickered and twitched. Under a sharpened black mustache the mouth yanked its corners into a grin that was more a display of little teeth, as if the lips had been caught by invisible fish-hooks. This was Lemuel B. Gooker, owner and operator of the Greater Carnival Shows. You would not have believed the stories told about him, and all but the kind ones were true.

"What is this?" Mr. Gooker repeated. A glare of ten-karat scorn spun through the kerosene dimness of the tent; fastened itself on the wrestler. The skin pulled tight over his cheekbones, and his mouth traveled up the left side of his face on the snarl. "Late again, you big sap! Get into that bathrobe and fake diamond belt of yours, and get out there. Listen, Tanglefoot, I thought most of Mirebank, Mississippi, was on our wagon wheels, but it's out there front of your stand and if you miss up to-night the way you did in Biloxi an' I have to pay another twenty-five to the suckers I'll wrap a fist around your nose."

"Yeah?" A quick flush steamed up Samson's temples at this tirade; he made a half step forward, then shrugged and picked up a tattered bath-

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robe, and hooked on the belt that any myopic could have noticed was glass.

Out of the night came the megaphoned summons. "And *now* he's coming outside, my friends. Coming out to give you the chance to accept his free challenge. You supply the ambition, *we* supply the togs and opportunity. Twenty-*five* dollars to the comer among you who stays with him thirty minutes or pins his shoulders to the mat. Catch as catch can, and your one, only and final chance to see Samson, Samson, Samson, world's wrestling champion and strong-gest living man—"

"There's your cue," the show owner jeered, "and hop to it, you muscle-bound head-bender! Make any boners to-night, don't forget, an' I'll tie you into a bow an' throw you clean through the roof of the tent. What's more, I don't wanta see you hangin' around Roberta, here, any more. Scram!"

The flush paled on the champion's forehead. "Stow it, big shot. Keep her out of it. Or I may forget I'm workin' for you."

"That so?" The little white teeth were gleaming. The currant eyes sped a roving glance up and down the girl, whipped back at the strong man. "Get out! Clear out! Beat it before I mop the mud up with you. Scat, you dopey, lily-livered—"

Roberta whirled, her voice vibrant, fierce with command. "Stop that, Gooker. You can't talk to Sam that way. He could break you into matchsticks and he's going to if—"

"Him? Break me? Don't let him fool you, kid. That guy's nothing but a great big piece of meat with all the blood cooked out of him. Ain't you, big boy? You're a slop, ain't you, Samson? You wouldn't *dare*, would you now, you strong man, you!"

Roberta was watching him, tense, expectant. Heavy-footed, he glared, blue eyes meeting black currants, grip to grip. Somehow the blue lost hold. Somehow the great shoulders sank and the blood faded in the tight-clenched lips. Turning slowly, the strongest living man stalked in darkness into the spotlight.

IT is only fair to say this much of Samuel Clements Jackson; he had taken a larger beating than most.

Reared to his mastodonic proportions in the rural milieu of the Corn Belt, he had early revealed his aptitude for pulling up fence posts by the roots, devouring four plates of chicken at a sitting, tearing vast mail order catalogs between his hands and throwing lusty farmers on their shoulder blades. Wherefore he had fallen victim to a scout, signed a contract and emerged a big time contender in the short time of two years.

Shy enough to keep the bright lights from hurting his eyes, he had learned and worked hard. Run the gamut of lumberjacks, Terrible Turks, slippery Greeks and unpronounceable Poles; felled this Hercules and that, until his managers, yes-men, masseurs and publicity boys had pushed him too far.

Pushed him into a fight with the champion. And the champion had proceeded to give our shy mammoth of muscles such a pushing as he had never dreamed possible in this game of push and take. Sweating out of the final headlock after forty minutes of a Spanish Inquisition that had broken his big toe, sprained his left arm, dislocated his right knee and inflated his skull to the size and airy composition of a helium balloon, Samuel Clements Jackson had expired on the mat with the jeers of the Garden pouring hot

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lead in his ears and a nervous headache that was to last him a long time. Things were said to him to make him never forget that match, but the match promptly forgot him. The Forgotten Man.

Ex-wrestlers are the quintessence of the term. Sam Jackson was soon to find himself relegated to the limbo of the park bench and lucky lunch, for his managers had also managed his money. The electric lights that had spelled his name over the Garden were gone; gone into his head. Changed to red lights. The red lights of the "Exit."

The sidewalks of New York. The ties of the Pennsylvania. Boots scuffing Virginia's magenta dust, beating out the madrigal of the road to the climes where no overcoat is needed. Sawing wood in one yard; dodging the dog in another. Then to Mississippi, hungry, hungry, hungry as hell. The Greater Lemuel B. Gooker Carnival Shows.

"You say you was a wrestler?"

"I—I was."

"Well, that's what I advertised fer, an' I didn't have no hopes of getting one, so I ain't disappointed. Do what I tell you an' you're drawin' your bacon an' beans. Now here's the gag—"

"AND here he is, ladeez and gentlemen—Samson the champion, Samson the strong man—right here before you on th' platform waiting to accept th' challenge, take on any comer, any one at all, an' start th' show. World's champion wrestler an' strongest living man!"

The crowd swayed forward. Foghorn Kelly threw out an arm, raised an expression of new delight and fresh admiration for the splendid athletic monument about to unveil on the platform beside him. Time for Samson to drop the bathrobe and display such a torso of bronzed gristle as would cause all weaklings in Mirebank, Mississippi, to shudder with righteous awe. Somehow he managed to turn, masked his face with the sternness of Thor, flung aside the robe, exercised under the carbide light. Muscles rippled, danced, vanished, reappeared on his arms, stood out like hawsers on his back. He inhaled and his chest billowed like a pigeon's bosom. He chinned himself with one hand on an iron bar. He empurpled himself, lifting lead weights, hoisting huge dumb-bells over his ears, picking up two hundred pounds with one hand and pulling a chain into links.

"An' now, folks. Four hundred pounds! Lifted like it was a feather."

The bell bar was not exactly four hundred pounds, but the thing was monstrously heavy. Muscles quivering on every part of his anatomy, Samson brought the giant bar up from the floor, slowly raised it over his head. The crowd cheered. Foghorn Kelly bowed. Samson was cautiously lowering his back-breaking burden. And suddenly, in the midst of his feat, something happened. It was no time for his heart, liver and stomach to turn to mint jello, which is precisely what they did.

His jaws fell open and his knees went to rubber and a great mouthful of snow choked his throat. The strongest man alive had shot a glance at the collected faces upturned in the pumpkin-colored torch glare, and on one face that glance had struck, bounced, become an icicle of terror that ricocheted back and hit him smack in the ribs.

He looked again. The face was still there, this time grinning. The bell bar weighed more than four hundred pounds. It weighed a thousand. Two thousand. Tons. Samson's legs shook like masts in a gale; giddy, struggling

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wildly he set down the bar. Anything to escape the platform, get away from that face. Panic!

The jaws of Foghorn Kelly were chewing out the final salvo. "Walk up now, friends, step up, step up—the performer's retiring an' the show begins—"

The performer was retiring, all right. Straining every tendon in his leg to keep them from bolting. Sweating like a nightmare as he got through the tent flaps and rushed, goggle-eyed, to his dressing room. Lord! What if that face had seen him! What if it had!

TWICE he paced the narrow confines of his canvas boudoir, sawing the air with fists; on the third turn he jumped to the wooden box on the table, snatched out a tin mirror, comb and bottle. Holding the bottle close to the kerosene lamp, he snarled, reading off the label. *Glosso. The Hair Oil That Makes You Young.*

A strange moment for vanity, and the hair oil seemed to do nothing to redeem the years of Samuel Clements Jackson; but he emptied a good half of the bottle into his scalp, made a few wild swipes with the comb, glared at the mirror and saw a contorted face wrenched sideways under a crazy mop of damp hair. Next he smoked five cigarettes, one after another, until the air was blue. Through the curtain drifted the chatter and blab of the customers seating themselves for the physical-cultural and wrist-twisting feast; Foghorn Kelly was in the ring announcing, rolling up his sleeves to play the part of referee; Mr. Gooker would be sitting ringside.

"Place your bets, gents," droned the advice. "Three of your fellow citizens, three sporting gents are prepared to win twenty-*fi*' bucks each *if* they stay with the champion or nail him to th' mat—"

Samuel Jackson's eye was a marble of fear pasted to a crack in the curtain. The crowd was seated, hushing, expectant. A flap opened at the other side of the arena and a man with a face, carriage and purpose of an annoyed bulldog stalked forward to mount the rostrum. A sigh of intense relief gushed from Samuel Jackson's lungs. Behind the curtain he smoked two more cigarettes, blowing fogs from his nostrils, nervously pinching out the butts. The customers were cheering their local boy.

"Atta boy, Joe."—"You'll show him, kid."—"How you gonna spend the money, Joe?"—"Teach him how they done it in the Navy, kid!"

The pounding lessened under Samson's ribs. Some retired Navy palooka out there. Town hero, or somebody. Gathering his muscles together, Samson pushed through the curtain, strode into the field of battle. The crowd watched him; Joe was watching him; he watched Joe. Maybe Joe was a tough looking boy, his limbs slabbed with steaks, his chest pouting like a whisky keg and decorated with angels, battleships and Hawaiian girls. Samson's stomach knotted a trifle at sight of this hippogrif that had been flushed from the Mississippi swamps to do him battle, but he made the most of his own entrance, thrust out his jaw, glowered, flexed his biceps and, his long wet hair tousled as a witch's broom, gave all the appearance of a maddened Bolshevik.

Foghorn Kelly called them together in conference for the usual "thou shalt nots" that all wrestlers ignore. No pinching, tickling, biting, gouging the enemy's eye with a thumb. Otherwise anything else from mayhem to homicide was fair.

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Samson had no mind for these preliminaries, being frantically engaged in trying to scan the pond of faces alongside the ring; but he could see nothing beyond the area of the droplights. Lemuel B. Gooker, prominently ringside with a cigar in his sneer, smacked a gong. Joe bounced out of his corner with the velocity of a fire cart, and from then on Samuel Clements Jackson was more than occupied.

JOE was nobody's softy. Life on the ocean wave, no matter how remote, had left him no more nerves than a pincushion and instructed him in the modus operandi of self defense. He considered the affair a combination football game and prize fight from the start; and twenty-five dollars was a fortune to him. He tore at the carnival wrestler as if the thing were a treasure hunt and the dollar bills concealed somewhere under Samson's skin; and our champion found himself in combat with something like a Roman circus.

The home town hero went in for kicking Samson's groin. Then he stiff-armed Sam on the chin. After which he climbed Mr. Jackson's midriff, locked a scissors hold on his stomach, nibbled his ear, breathed in his face, pumped his arm with half Nelsons and doubled him grunting against the ropes. He was profligate with rabbit punches and not adverse to excavating skin with his nails, but Sam, limbered by the coal mine guards, had not forgotten his own craft. Despite the fox of fright that continued to gnaw his vitals, he managed to avoid Joe's paws and pull a few of the sailor's ligaments in the bargain.

In three minutes the pair of them were perspiring like April sidewalks, puffing like trains, inextricably tangled. Then, to the delight of Mirebank, Mississippi, it was seen that Joe had fastened on Samson a wicked arm-lock. No doubting the gasp of agony that whistled from the strong man's teeth, the expression of excruciated frustration knotting his forehead. Samson could not break the hold and was suffering. Writhing like so many pythons, the carnival champion ended up in a most painful posture, chest to the floor, legs helplessly bicycling while Joe straddled his spine and neatly pushed his twisted arm farther and farther up the middle of his back. The only thing Samson could do was moan aloud, and grab Joe with his free hand and pull Joe's face down into his back hair. The grinning town boy smothered a little, but tightened the hold. Samson's eyes began to bulge. He puffed. His feet beat the mat. He did not break the hold. Another minute and Joe would throw him completely over and pin him down.

"Two bucks more on Joe!"—"Five bucks he throws the strong man!"—"Joe's got your big palooka now!"—"Think we ain't got no wrestlers in Mirebank? Betcha eight bucks!"

Gaudy in green stripes and yellow straw roofing, Lemuel B. Gooker maneuvered up the aisle collecting, even inviting these wagers. Despite the unhappy situation of his champion gladiator, the show owner seemed cool, and his face wore no expression whatever, save, perhaps, that of a wolf sitting in church.

The excitement was mounting to a hullabaloo. Five, eight, twelve minutes Samson endured Joe's agonizing grip. Dimly, half deafened, red-eyed from the torture screwed on his doubled arm, our champion listened to the cheering and jeering, saw the arena as a pinwheel of lights and spinning shadows in which was centered the vision of a mocking face. Yet he managed to

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carry on, almost as if he enjoyed these arm-locks. The visionary face was what scared him. And it was Joe who began to tire. He could squeeze Samson's arm to the breaking point, but he could squeeze it no farther, and he wished he could get his face out of the strong man's hair. There was not enough air in this canvas coliseum. The circulation was bad. The aroma of stale straw, carnival mud, cigarettes, perspiration was enough to stifle anybody.

The triumphant Joe began to wish he hadn't eaten those three hot dogs down by the shooting gallery. All at once he was willing to forfeit triumph and twenty-five dollars and the whole affair. His profound sigh was all Samuel Clements Jackson waited to hear. With a violent twist, a desperate arching of the spine, Samson broke the hold on his arm; whirled over on the mat, pitched the Mirebank hope flat on his back and sat on him. One down, and two to go.

BUT the minute he reached the privacy of his dressing room, the victorious stance went out of his spine and, again, he was a jell of nerves, pacing, smoking desperately, scowling in freshened anxiety. He emptied the rest of the hair oil bottle into his punished scalp; then sat on a battered trunk, massaged a bruise on his elbow and dizzily tried to think. The panic inside him made his pores run like faucets, but every time he thought of the girl he flushed with shame, and when he thought of Gooker his fists knotted into mauls.

Why hadn't he socked the big wiseguy? Geez, why couldn't he get Roberta out of all this? By George, he'd go out there and—

And there was Foghorn Kelly announcing the second bout. Bathed in sweat and apprehensions, Samson crept to the crack in the curtain. Saved again. Another local boy come to answer the challenge. A gawky stevedore with a lamp jaw and gold teeth, sauntering forward through smoke and applause to pick up the gauntlet. Old Man River made them tough.

The second bout of that evening was substantially a repetition of the first with a few minor variations in the way of shin-kicking and backhanded slaps, and the citizens of Mirebank, having lost their money on their first boy, howling like wildcats for revenge. Once more Samson's enemy seemed on the verge of victory, slamming our strong man to the mat with a most painful hammer lock.

Once again Samson's free hand closed on his adversary's necknape and dragged the lamp jawed face of the riverman into close proximity with his mopped hair. And yet again the contender seemed to lose his enthusiasm for this Olympic sport, seemed to weaken and cave at the crucial moment.

For the benefit of the customers, Samson whirled Lamp Jaw into a tail spin, tossed him with a nice flying mare across the mat and spread him out to dry as cold as an icicle.

Lemuel B. Gooker strolled through the bleachers pocketing the odds; Samson bowed to the stunned auditorium; Foghorn Kelly waved his arms in a last burst of ballyhoo.

"And, now, ladeez and gents. The *final* match of the *evening*—"

A GREAT many people would always remember the last wrestling act of the Great Lemuel B. Gooker Carnival Shows as exhibited in Mirebank, Mississippi, that night. Mr.

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Gooker himself, for one. The male population of Mirebank, for another. Foghorn Kelly would never forget it; neither would Samson the Strong Man, or Roberta the Lady with the Radio Eyes, or a certain gentleman known by the name of Nutcracker Nolan.

Any one in the profession can tell you that the greatest dramas of the theater are those playing behind the scenes; a look behind the scenes of the dowdy wrestling tent that night would have witnessed this Nutcracker Nolan in his dressing room at one end of the big top, grinning like a Gorgon as he stripped among a little coterie of friends and plunged his legs into a pair of black tights.

"Can yuh beat it?" he would be chuckling. "Say. Now we'll have some sport."

Behind the scenes in Samson the Strong Man's dressing room a different atmosphere. Tobacco smoke. Perspiration. Nerves. Anger. Discouragement. In the ten minutes intermission, Samuel Clements Jackson waded through these mental hazards and five hundred more, alternately the condemned man in his cell, the frustrated lover, the teased giant, the clown who laughed and the Forgotten Man. Had he seen the face out front, or hadn't he? Had the face spotted him? Why hadn't he socked Gooker? Was he yellow?

"I can't go on with this," he groaned at himself. "Geez, it isn't decent. I got to tell her."

"Tell what, Sam?" She slipped through the curtain; stood regarding him with a puzzled smile. "My goodness, you're all upset again. And look at all those cigarettes. Heavens!"

"What you want?" he asked sullenly, staring at the floor.

"Why, Sam. I—I just came to tell you how proud I was. You're wonderful tonight."

"Yeah?" he said bitterly.

"But you were. I caught your show out there to-night. The way you handled thoe two toughies—you were marvelous." Pulling the worn cape over her costume, she stepped at him, confronted him, small and pale. Her eyes were large, appealing at him. "You *are* a champion, Sam," she said softly. "The way you've been talking, I—I thought you were afraid. Then when I saw you march out there and throw those ruffians—"

"Aw, they were just easy."

"No, but you were good. I know a little about wrestling matches. You don't know what it means to me," she whispered, lowering her eyes, "but I—you ought to get out of this rotten carnival before it gets you. Don't throw away your chances any more. I'd hate to have you go—leave the show, I mean, and—but get out of this, Sam! You can make a comeback!"

"Cut it!" He spun at her, crimson-cheeked. "G'wan, kid," he told her roughly. "You don't know nothin' about it. Geez, can't you *see?*"

"You're trying to tell me you're afraid?"

"I'm trying to tell you—"

"He ain't going to tell nobody anything," snarled Lemuel B. Gooker, swinging through the curtains with a bottle in his fist. The show owner's mouth was twitching with excitement. He strode at Samson, sputtering. "Thought I told you to quit bothering Roberta. Any more of this phenagling an' I'll tie you in a bow an' throw you through th' top of th' tent. Wake up, sap! You're almost due out there."

"Listen, Gooker—"

"Hold the mouth, push-face! You fall down on me, now, and I'll kick

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your nose in. I come in here durin' the last match an' see you used all your hair oil. Here's a fresh bottle. Get made up, an' be ready. You gotta win this match, stupid! You *got* to, understand? You got to use," he sneered cryptically, "everything you got. There's a good guy against you for once, sap, an' the town's bettin' its last nickel on him to beat you. You know who's gettin' ready to tackle you?"

"Who?"

"This is the guy's home town," Gooker steamed, "an' he was among th' suckers out front catching your turn. It's the champ, see?"

THE six feet two of Samuel Clements Jackson seemed to contract, shrink him old. "The champ!" Like gulping a sour drink.

"Yeah, you fathead. The champ. Nutcracker Nolan!"

The dressing room went merry-go-round about Samson's head. His glance, frantic, sped from Gooker to the girl to the door. The carnival operator's lips continued to jerk excited words. "Quick! Get your make-up on. Dose this bottle—"

Dimly he saw Roberta dart toward him, eyes luminous. She was hugging his arm. "Sam! *Now's* your chance to show them! Think of it—a chance to meet the champion of the United States. Oh, Sam, I know you can win—"

Ponderous with the ache in it, he shook his head; shook the low, fumbly words from his tongue. "I ain't going to wrestle him."

"What?" the staggered Gooker had to scream.

"I'm not going out there and wrestle Nutcracker Nolan."

"Sam!" Roberta tugged his arm; cried out. "Sam, you must!"

"No!" he muttered. "And I won't." Snatching abruptly, he grabbed the bottle of hair oil from Gooker's fist, turned, smashed it spang against a tent pole. Glass and liquid went flying. Then, moving like a mechanical man with his cogs rusted, he stepped to the wash stand and poured a pitcher of water into his scalp.

Roberta was standing with palms pressed to white cheeks; Mr. Lemuel B. Gooker made soundless pantomimes of profanity and rage. Shaking water like a mastiff, shoulders hunched, Samson started for the door. "I'm through."

"Through!" The girl had stepped swiftly to confront him, and she gashed him with that word and a laugh. "So. I guess you *are* afraid, Sam Jackson." The laugh became a sob of scorn. Turning her back on the dampened Goliath, she sank against the green-striped bosom of the furious show owner. "Oh, Lem. I've been such a fool. You were right about him, Lem darling. Take me away."

The features of Mr. Gooker slid from rage to delight to a lascivious leer. "I always said he was yella," he pronounced, his pale eyes stabbing the strong man, then burning down into the girl's blue ones. Stooping with the triumphal sneer of the lady-killer, the suavity of the boudoir impresario and the technique of a stock company actor, he kissed her yielding lips. "Sure I'll take you, kiddo. Right now."

Out in the main tent Foghorn Kelly was augmenting a growing din with the violence of his own trained lungs. "*Ladeez* an' gentlemen! Interdoocing the *final* challenger for the twenty-fi' dollars! Have great honor to present to you your famous fellow citizen—in this cornerrrrr—*Nutcracker Nolan!*"

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Samuel Clements Jackson lashed the curtain aside, hurled himself out of the dressing room, bounded a bale of straw, four tent pegs, a row of bleachers seats and the legs of an astonished spectator, and landed, panting, in the center of the ring.

YOU may have it from no less reliable a source than Foghorn Kelly, who umpired the fiasco, that the final match of that evening was somewhat larger and nothing smaller than a high-velocity cyclone popped suddenly into the heart of that carnival tent.

Samson the Strong Man came through the ropes like a twister, and the wind of his bulk going by almost upset Foghorn from his nimble rubber soles. The expression on Samson's face made the pulses thud in Foghorn's wrists, and the Mirebank audience, sensing that undercurrent of lightning on the loose, hunched forward in seat-edge excitement. And something else was amiss. Foghorn, possessed of a highly sensitive nose, missed a certain aroma of tobacco and scented immediate trouble.

Samson took his bow wearing the grin of a convict in a guillotine tumbrel, then wheeled to watch Nutcracker Nolan swagger forward for instructions. When the Irish-American champion dropped his bathrobe the entire tent inhaled. Samson wore muscles; but this sportsman was a behemoth of rippling gristle, shorter by two inches than the carnival performer, but thick as a barrel in the chest, rolling and slippery at the waist, shoulders slabbed, looking greasy and pliable as hard butter, from belt to cropped head a burnt bronze and hairy as a doormat.

Deafened by the shouting, dazed by the nearness of this final adversary, Samson stood in a well of cold and wanted only the gong. Nolan was grinning at him; teeth that seemed to spread all the way across the tent.

"If it ain't Jackson," came the chuckle. "I thought I reckanized you out on th' platform. Strongest man in th' world, hey? Say! Just what I need fer a little exercise."

Gong!

The echo hadn't started to die when Samson soared from his corner. Simultaneously the Nutcracker soared from his and the collision in mid-ring was like the shock of meeting dinosaurs in some cavern of primal hate, a crash that quaked the platform and almost brought down the ridge pole. Instantly Samuel Clements Jackson and Nutcracker Nolan spun in such a tangle of legs, arms, feet, fingers muscles and might that an observer, bewildered, could have thought them the Siamese twins convulsed in fury and determined at last to sever relationship.

On hind legs the audience howled; Lemuel B. Gooker could be heard yelling, too, dodging among the hysterical spectators with dollar bills waving like green leaves in his fingers. Samuel Jackson heard, saw and felt nothing. Nolan had him crushed in a scissors, his left arm doubled into a figure-8 and his head twisted catacorner on his neck, but he experienced no pain. He held the Nutcracker in a combination half Nelson, wrist and finger lock that bent the Irishman's spine, and the Irishman was beginning to groan. Grunting, wheezing, gasping, the couple waltzed twice around the mat, spun, crashed, rolled. A look of intense surprise crossed the Irishman's face at this time, and he squeezed until his legs turned blue. Samson panted and writhed; got an elbow into Nolan's middle and snapped the scis-

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sors apart. Nutcracker staggered backwards. Samson gave a fierce yank on the Irishman's wrist, brought him around in a fandango whirl, took a kick in the shins and was caught in a hug that flattened his ribs. Together they went down.

All this in the first five minutes, the breath whaled out of everybody concerned, and nobody more astonished at the unbottled frenzy than Nutcracker Nolan unless, of course, it was Samson, himself. Finding himself being dismembered in a vise, Nutcracker whinnied and b-l-u-s-h-e-d, strained and squirmed, clawed the mat and bulged in anguish and finally got a foot under Samson's jaw to kick him across the ring.

COMING up from the somersault, Samson was only in time to get the dive, catching Nolan's head neatly in his stomach. Working on the rebound, his face inflated by the battering-ram smash, he brought his flat hand down hard on Nolan's neck. The Nutcracker floundered with a gasp of annoyance, danced backward. Samson was after him, hands waving as if to transfix the Irishman with a magic pass; but Nolan slithered in like a shadow, grabbed Samson in a tremendous bear hug and spun him across the mat. Again the boy took a head-smash under the ribs. Lights pirouetted before his eyes, but the center piece of the pyrotechnic was Nolan's face, and he stumbled to catch it.

Kicks, elbow stabs, stiffarms, uppercuts hailed off his body, shoulders and chin; head down he waded into them all. Three times Nutcracker Nolan's flying dives crashed Sam to the mat; each time he came up on the bound and hurried after the elusive Irishman. Ten minutes—and a look of punishment came to Nolan's cobblestone face. Sweat showered down his forehead; the grin of amusement had altered to a grin of puzzled rage. Rushing in, he tried to catch Samson for a flying mare, but the carnival wrestler dodged the grip and threw Nolan with a toe hold that bothered him to shouting. When he, in turn, fastened a neck-breaking Nelson on the black-haired enemy, Samson only snorted and whirled him into an adagio.

By this time the audience was leaping and screaming like a cage of monkeys; Lemuel B. Gooker was seen to dance up and down in a whole hysteria of emotion; the tent roared like an ammunition factory; and the wrestlers were tearing at each other with all the fury in the world.

Nolan had strength, science, confidence. Samson had muscles, science and rage. Both were red as cardinals. Both were volcanically erupted, frantic. Time after time the Nutcracker rushed in to clamp his famous headlock, only to find his arm embracing hot air and Samson's steaming forehead vanished out of the way. And each time Nutcracker missed, Samson gnashed out a yell and snatched the Irishman into a new and more painful clutch. Fifteen minutes, and Nolan was fit to be tied. The champion of America given the slip by a carnival wash-out. Already he could read the razz of the sporting sheets; and the thought had him trumpeting and rushing like an elephant on a May walk.

Again they slammed together. Again they bounced away, winded and raging. Again Nutcracker rushed in for the headlock and missed. It was no slow motion wrestling match with the victim of a fall slowly pulling himself to his feet and returning groggily to fumble for a grip. The man who went

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down skyrocketed up again full speed, the crashing of torso on torso shook the canvas roof overhead.

A GLOW came to the Irishman's eyes that had not been there before. There was something uncanny about this beaten carnival mug who refused to take his beating and stay down. No stalling, no waiting, no pleasant intermissions. Nolan began to feel cheated. Like a boy who opens a box of firecrackers for a pleasant diversion only to find he's set off a carton of dynamite. And upwelling fury did nothing to improve his technique, whereas Samson, who had started in blind anger, seemed to be cooling into a tempered blade that fended Nolan's tricks and had him jumping.

The Nutcracker charged and countercharged, ducked, dodged, lured, slapped, slugged and twisted to no avail; Samson continued to weave his arms and bore in. Everybody knew it had to end, but nobody knew just how it happened. Waltzing together, the pair exchanged torturing grips; Nolan broke a toe hold by kicking Samson's ear and tumbling him across the arena. A moment when each man stood in a far corner glaring. Then cords snapped, air whistled, they crashed in mid-ring like express trains. Samson was down.

Then Nolan was down. Then Samson, then Nolan, then Samson, then Nolan, all too fast for the eye to follow. There was a moment when the Nutcracker's great left arm hooked over Samson's head; tightened, and started to drag the boy across the mat. Blood ebbed from the temples of Samuel Clements Jackson. His eyes shone like glass. His shoulders began to grow, swell, expand. Slowly, inch by inch he lifted himself from his knees, grew to his feet with the gurgling Irishman a gorilla fastened to his back. Then Samson whirled, shook his neck, bucked and bounded; jackknifed in mid-air. Nutcracker Nolan swan dived toward the ceiling, his mouth yawning and arms outspread; fell flat and crashed to the mat. Like a falling chimney Samson toppled at the recumbent Irishman; spread him flat as an eagle on a coin. The tent was full of wind, and the Irishman was out.

A tremendous bellow blew from the bleachers. A cheer from Foghorn Kelly. A baffled screech from Mr. Lemuel B. Gooker. A mellow chuckle from Samson the Strong Man.

Cuffing perspiration from his nose, Samson tottered to his feet and stepped across the fallen idol and started for the ropes.

"Stop!" The howl burst from the entrance, smothered the din. Heads and eyes turned at the main door. A tall man in a frock coat, gloved fingers twisting at a handlebar mustache, pressed forward through the wedge, followed by a sprightly fat man in a linen suit and silver noseglasses.

"I'm Sheriff McClintic o' Mirebank. This yere is Doc Holloway. Citizens, y'all done been cheated by this show. I'm puttin' this strong man fella under arrest. Joe Eastgate's complaint. Joe says he wrestled this strong man this evenin'. Joe use to be in th' hospital corps on a Navy battleship. He says as how this strong man's a swindler an' that he knocks his opponents out by usin' opium or ether or chloroform in his hair—some kind of dope to smother 'em, Joe says."

"That so?" Samson's voice boomed. Stooping, he climbed through the ropes, stalked to the officer's side. "O. K., sheriff. Why, I just washed my hair

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to-night. Huh. Go ahead. Have your doc take a look. Maybe it's time I had my head examined, at that."

IT was true that Samson, world's champion wrestler and strongest living man, threw Nutcracker Nolan with nothing more than the vehemence of his heart and soul, the fury of one determined to do or die, the last minute courage of the strong will bent on a comeback. There was no iota of an opiate to be found in his hair, and the sheriff and his doctor stalked away. But in all fairness to Nutcracker Nolan it must be admitted the Irishman had been laid up in Mirebank, Mississippi, with a touch of "flu," he was not prepared for such an uncalled for battle, nor was he in love. Samuel Clements Jackson had that much clear advantage.

When the seats were deserted and the main tent quiet and the midway chilling with shadows and deepening night, Samuel Clements Jackson, suitcase in hand, hurried to a certain tent. Odd coincidence that Roberta Roberti, the Lady with the Radio Eyes, should be found at such an hour in a faded traveling suit with her own bag packed.

"I come to say g'by," Samson fumbled, watching her through lamplight. "I guess you heard what the sheriff said out there. I guess you know. Well, I was throwin' those other hams with that trick. I was scared all the time. Scared of headlocks. Y'see, when Nutcracker Nolan threw me in that match in New York he give me a slight concussion. Doctors told me if I ever got another it might finish me for good."

She nodded, wordless, eyes on the ground.

"That's why I smoke so much," he went on, dully. "Hid the smell of that stuff on my hair. Well, when I saw Nutcracker out there to-night—scared me stiff. Anyhow—now I know I can break those headlocks. I'm not scared of them any more. I'm going back to the big time wrestling now. I can do it. Well—uh—I just wanted to thank you for all you done for me. G'by."

"Good-by, Sam."

"I suppose," he mumbled, "you're packed to go away with—with Gooker. And—and good luck."

"No," she whispered, "I'm just going by—by myself."

"By yourself with me out to hunt up that sheriff," he grinned. "And don't ever let me see you kiss anybody else again. Gee, I didn't care if I died or not. That snipe of a show owner!"

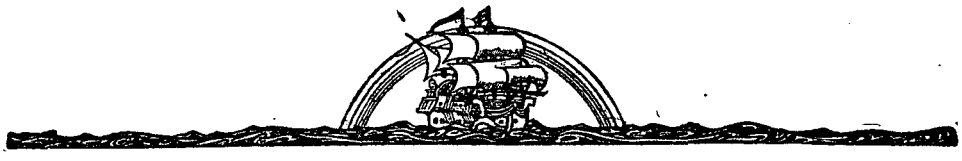
"Wha—what's that groaning sound out in the midway, Sam?"

"Just now? Oh. Gooker. He came to my dressing room sore as blazes. Y'see, when he seen I didn't put on any hair oil he figured I'd lose to Nolan, so he went out an' made a bunch of bets against me. Lost plenty, too. So he came to my tent and started yelling. I tied him in a bow and threw him through the roof."

"Sam, darling— You're awfully strong—"

"For you, honey. Strongest man in the world."

THE END



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"I'm a dead shot, captain!"

The Trail of Danger

By WILLIAM MacLEOD RAINE

Author of "Luck," "King of the Bush," etc.

Vigilantes' law was rough and ruthless, but the California of the Gold Rush days had no other that would work

LEADING UP TO THIS INSTALLMENT

YOUNG Dennis Gifford, from the East, was headed for the California gold fields when he was shanghaied. That happened in San Francisco, and he was taken aboard a vessel belonging to a powerful San Franciscan shipping owner, Benjamin Shanks. Dennis escaped, at Monterey, and was aided by the family of an honorable old Spaniard, Don Ramon Martinez. The Martinez family hid him from the irate captain of the vessel (a reward was offered for all returned runaways), as well as from the wrath of a bandit killer, Juan Castro, who had had the audacity to make advances to Rosita, one of the daughters of old Martinez. Juan suspected Gifford of being a rival for the girl's affections, and he was not far wrong. He threatened the young Easterner with death.

Castro belonged to the gang of the notorious bandit, Joaquin Murietta, who had a particular aversion to all Americans from the East; and when Dennis reached San Francisco once more, he learned that Murietta's outfit was connected with Shipping Master Shanks in some mysterious illicit business or other. Even kindly old Don Ramon Martinez, it seemed, was under their thumbs.

Frontier San Francisco was a hellhole of outlawry, Dennis found. Benja-

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min Shanks seemed to have the law in his hands, and his first lieutenant was one Bruce Marshall, a ruthless bully and a killer. They made outrageous use of the "Sydney Ducks," or escaped criminals from Australia, to achieve their purposes. Even the town's better element—men like Brannan and Ryckman and Ward; like Captain Brown of the ship which had carried Dennis from Monterey to San Francisco, and Dennis's former companion, Tully Green—even these men seemed helpless to oppose San Francisco's new underworld.

Dennis's life was threatened by Marshall, who accused him of attentions to Lola Montez, the famous actress. Dennis had met her, but the meeting was not of his doing. Hence, because he was innocent, he was the more fearless before Bruce Marshall. But he was disgusted by the fact that no one seemed to be doing anything to curb the activities of such men, and he determined to do what he could to arouse the interest of San Francisco citizens in vigilante law.

CHAPTER XIII.

DENNIS FREES HIS MIND.

AS Dennis stood at the foot of the narrow stairway leading to Brannan's office, uncertain whether to turn into Bush Street or Sansome Street, he caught sight of some one whose presence brought him to swift attention and set a pulse beating swiftly in his throat. Bruce Marshall was standing on the opposite corner. He was waiting for the traffic to slacken before crossing the street.

Dennis's first impulse was to slip quietly back up the stairway; his second was to stand his ground. Some day he was bound to meet this man, and it might as well be now. At any rate, he would have fair play and would not be caught in a trap. Swiftly he eased the revolver in the scabbard under his armpit. In the swiftness of the draw might lie all the difference between life and death.

Marshall chose his moment, and walked across the street. While he stood on the sidewalk exchanging greetings with an acquaintance, young Gifford did not once lift his eyes from the man. As usual, the killer was clad in black broadcloth and white frilled shirt. His boots were highly polished. But to-day he had discarded his high silk hat for a broad-rimmed black felt.

Dennis hoped he would disappear round the corner, but he came directly toward the young man. Not until he was about five paces away did Marshall catch sight of Gifford. Abruptly he pulled up in his stride, and into his pale face the angry color flushed. His prominent eyes bulged, as he glared at his adversary.

The young man looked at him steadily, silently, without flinching. Dennis's right arm was lying across his body, the fingers within an inch or two of the concealed Colt's revolver.

"I—warned you!" Marshall cried, hoarsely.

The chill that had run down the spine of the boy was gone. So, too, was the flutter of nerves. He felt cool and poised, ready for any turn of the cards.

"Meaning—now?" he drawled.

Marshall felt a shock of surprise. For good reasons, it was not his intention to bring this matter to the issue of personal combat. There was an easier way to get rid of this young fool. But the look in the youngster's eyes took him aback. In their gray depths was an icy steadiness quite unexpected. No muscle of the face or body moved; and a deadly threat lay in that tigerish stillness.

The face of the killer was venomous; his mouth a thin cruel line. The long fingers of his right hand twitched,

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but the arm made no slightest movement toward a weapon. He waved a hand as if to brush this inconsequential adversary aside.

"Run along! Get out of my way!" he ordered.

Already, fifty passers-by had sensed there was trouble afoot, and they were crowding out of the line of fire.

"Try running along yourself," advised Dennis, loud enough for all to hear. "I don't do my running from bullies."

The killer gasped, so unexpected was this slap in the face. He would as soon have looked for a rabbit to turn on a bulldog. His face turned almost black.

"Do you know who I am?" he roared.

"Sure I do. You're Play-It-Safe Marshall. I saw you shoot down Brewer, when he wasn't expecting it. That's the difference now—I'm ready."

Marshall had his instructions. They were to let this boy alone; for he was to be dealt with in a safer and subtler way. But he was a man of swift and uncontrollable passion. From his throat there came a roar of rage, and his arm had begun to move when a voice cut in, sharp and menacing:

"Not again, Marshall!"

It stopped him, just as it stopped Gifford, their weapons half drawn.

GERRITT RYCKMAN stepped forward.

"If you kill this boy, Marshall, I swear before God to have you hanged before night!"

Dennis spoke, his voice a jeer, his eyes still fixed on the gunman.

"He isn't going to kill me, Mr. Ryckman. The fireworks are off now, I reckon. But I was aiming to kill *him.*"

Some one laughed, a high nervous cackle. But neither Ryckman nor Marshall showed any mirth. Both looked at the speaker. His slender, lithe figure was absolutely without motion, catlike in its poised wariness. In the eyes shone a cold, fierce eagerness. A boy he might be in years, but the threat of death was implicit in his crouched energy.

"It's lucky for him you came, Mr. Ryckman," the elder killer said, uneasily.

Gifford did not answer that. He spoke to Marshall, choosing his words carefully, in a low clear voice that all could hear. Out of the depths of his mind he dragged a vocabulary of scabrous epithets — coward, bully, blackleg, hired assassin for another poisonous reptile in the background, snake in the grass. These were the mildest terms the boy could find for the dangerous warrior whom he was tongue-lashing.

The man in broadcloth stood aghast. He found words at last.

"I won't stand it! By Gad, no! Never in my life—never—have I—"

"Why don't you cut loose the way you did at Brewer?" sneered young Gifford. "Maybe I'm lying—maybe I wasn't the best pistol shot in Maryland. Cut loose—if you're such a whale of a fighter!"

"That's enough, boy," Ryckman ordered, sharply. "You move along, Marshall. I'll take care of this young fellow."

Marshall glared around him. He did not know what to do. His prestige was shaken to its very foundations. A boy —in his teens—had taunted him before fifty men, urging him to come on and fight. But he dared not—not with Ryckman standing there, ready to sick the whole citizenry upon him if he should destroy the youngster. Moreover, deep in his heart, for the first

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time, there had been planted a doubt of his own infallibility as a duelist.

The big killer stood up, square-shouldered and impressive.

"I don't exchange billingsgate with guttersnipes, but if you ever cross my path again—look out," he said.

Then he turned and stalked away.

RYCKMAN dragged the boy upstairs to Brannan's office. He pushed through to the inner room, barely waiting for the answer to his knock.

"Gentlemen, let me introduce to you Jack the Giant Killer," he said, his bright eyes gleaming.

Brannan glanced at Dennis. "What's he been doing now?"

"Practically nothing at all," answered Ryckman, "except to tell that scoundrel Bruce Marshall that he is a cowardly bully, a dirty blackleg, a hired murderer, and a worthless humbug imposing himself as a gentleman."

Ward sat up in his chair, imps of delight dancing in his eyes.

"And when did he do this?—Why didn't Marshall blast him off the earth?"

"That's another story," Ryckman replied. "But first let's find out who this young Hector is, and why Marshall has a grudge against him."

"We know that," Ward responded, and in five sentences told of the youth's recent history.

"The reason Marshall did not shoot it out was that Mr. Ryckman warned him he'd be hanged before night if he killed me," Dennis said, speaking for the first time.

"That was one reason," Ryckman agreed. "But you stood there like a young fighting cock in a pit, every crow a jeer at him. The fellow was taken by surprise, and he didn't know what to make of it. If it was bluff, young fellow, you'd better get out of town, *muy pronto*. Perhaps you had anyhow. He'll not rest until he's settled with you."

"Then you and Mr. Brannan had better leave with me," Dennis said with a grin. "You've both been threatened a good many times by the Sydney gentry. —Where shall we go?"

"Meaning you're going to stay? Is that it?" Ward asked.

"That's it."

"You haven't answered Ryckman's question," Brannan cut in. "Why were you trying to anger Marshall? If he'd called your bluff, would he have found a full hand or only a pair of deuces?"

"A six full," Gifford told him. "What I told Marshall is true. Last year I won the pistol championship of Maryland."

"Hmp!" snorted Brannan. "Shooting at a target is one thing. At a man, while he's emptying a weapon at you, that's another."

"You haven't told us yet why you were trying to devil him into drawing," Ward said.

"I was hoping to get an even chance with him. Better that than to be shot down from ambush without warning."

"Right," assented Brannan. "The bold way is always the safe way."

"You mean the safer," Ryckman corrected. "I don't think any of us four are safe here. You were shadowed for months, Sam, after your activity against the regulators. At that time I wouldn't have given a pinch of snuff for your life." He looked around quietly and gathered the eyes of the other three in the room. "I think the time has come, gentlemen, for the bold way.—Are you ready?"

"Two good men came to see me yesterday about that," Brannan said;

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and he gave their names. "We all know some who can be trusted. Let's call a meeting and organize a people's committee of protection, with a tribunal for the punishment of crime. We'll check over the names of those of whom we're sure, and we'll meet here tonight. If we are agreed, then this must be absolutely secret, gentlemen."

Each of them took an oath not to divulge what they had in mind.

CHAPTER XIV.

DUFF CONWAY MEETS A TARTAR.

SAN FRANCISCO was still a comparatively small city, and its thousands of floaters swept up and down the main streets all day and night. It was therefore not surprising that Dennis came face to face with Long Jim, the boatswain of the Mary Bligh.

"When did you get in?" Dennis asked.

"Last night," the boatswain answered. He glanced around at the hurrying pedestrians, to make sure that he knew none of them. "When can I see you alone, lad?"

"In the back room of the Ivy Green—say in ten minutes. That's it, across the way."

Not another word was said between them. Each moved forward, and neither looked back.

But when Dennis walked into the back room of the Ivy Green saloon a few minutes later Long Jim was there, sipping a glass of grog.

After Gifford had sat down at the little table the boatswain leaned forward and spoke in a hoarse whisper. "The word's out that you're to be taken back to the ship, me boy. There's an offer of a hundred dollars in gold to the man that can get ye there, by hook or crook."

"That's a lot of money, Jim. Why am I worth so much?"

"You'll have to ask some one that knows more than I do to find that out, boy.—But I'll tell you this. Old Shanks was aboard, soon as we got in. He spent an hour in the cabin with the Old Man and Duff Conway. After he left, the word was passed about the reward. You'd better look sharp and keep indoors nights."

"Why don't you try for the hundred yourself, Jim?" asked Dennis, with a grin.

A dark flush ran under the deep tan of the boatswain's face. "Because I'm not a crimp; I'm an honest man," he said, with an oath.

Dennis offered his hand impulsively. "Don't I know it, Jim? It was you who saved me at Monterey, the night I escaped. You had your hands on me, and let go. You fell down on purpose for the others to stumble over you."

"I'm no man-hunter for Duff Conway and his likes!" the sailor growled. On the spur of the moment he made a decision. "They're a rotten bunch, from old Shanks himself down to Cap Little and Conway. I'm through with 'em—made my last voyage on the Mary Bligh! Me, I'll sail on an honest boat or none at all."

"That's the way to talk, Jim! I came up on the Hope Allen. Captain Brown told me he was short-handed. I'll go and see him with you, if you like."

"I'll take that kindly of you!" Long Jim said.

As the two men walked down to the wharf where the Hope Allen lay, Dennis kept his eyes wide open. If they met some of the officers or crew of the Mary Bligh, he did not want to be

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taken at a disadvantage, and down along the water front was a likely spot to run into them. Here were the saloons and dives most frequented by seamen. From one of these dives some of the crew of the brig might pour at any moment.

Though he was warily alert against a surprise, the deeper currents of the young man's mind were busy searching for the answer to a question. Why had Shanks thought it worth while to put up a hundred dollars reward for his capture? Since Dennis had interfered with Castro at Monterey, perhaps Shanks thought it just as well to get rid of him. He had become a nuisance. If he could be taken aboard the Mary Bligh as a captured deserter, there would be no more trouble with him.

Of one thing Dennis was reasonably sure. By this time Shanks knew that he had been in conference with Brannan and Ryckman. Shanks's spies would report that to him. A picture flashed before Dennis. He saw a huge mass of flesh slumped in a chair, and two eyes filmed like those of a dead cod resting inscrutably on him. And swiftly, on the heel of that vision, another—the deck of the brig Mary Bligh, beating out to sea on a dark night, furtive figures flinging a dead weight overboard, the body of Dennis Gifford plunging down into the cold, rolling waters.

CAPTAIN BROWN was not at the wharf nor on board the Hope Allen. One of the mates, supervising the unlading of the vessel, suggested that he might be found at the offices of the company.

Long Jim and Dennis walked along the water front toward the offices of the West Coast Trading Company.

"There she lies; the dirty trollop!" Long Jim said, with a hitch of the thumb toward a brig lying at anchor in the bay.

A glance told Dennis that it was the Mary Bligh.

He was still looking at her when he heard voices, and three men walked out of a saloon, apparently making for a rowboat tied to a post at the end of a pier.

The men were Captain Little, Duff Conway, and Reb Simon, first mate of the brig. Conway was the first to catch sight of the two men.

"Long Jim's got him, by God!" he roared.

Out of the corner of his mouth Long Jim spat a word at Gifford:

"Run for it!"

But it was too late for that. The officers of the Mary Bligh had spread out to cut off a retreat.

Dennis backed a few steps to the land end of the pier.

"I'm all right, Jim, if you'll stand by me and do as I say," he said quietly.

"I'll take orders, mate," Long Jim said.

He could see no way of escape, but he was not going to desert the boy.

Dennis spoke to Little, his voice as cool and edged as the singing of a whip lash.

"I'm armed, captain, and I'm a dead shot.—Remember that, and you'll save yourself trouble."

Captain Little stopped Duff Conway as the second mate was about to charge forward.

"Steady does it, Duff." To Dennis he said, "Now, my lad, we've got you; no two ways about that. It's for you to say whether you want to go aboard with a broken head or without one."

"Neither, thank you, captain. I

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don't like your ship nor its officers. I'll stay ashore." Drawing his revolver, Dennis added quietly, "I'll shoot down any one or all of you, with the greatest pleasure in the world!"

Like a bull elephant Conway trumpeted his defiance and charged. Dennis fired twice.

The mate crashed down with an impact that shook the wharf.

"The damned scut's killed me!" he screamed.

The young man knew better than that. He had aimed at the fellow's legs. But he did not think it necessary to correct the misinformation.

"You still want to take me aboard, captain?" he asked.

Little did not answer. He was legging it to a point of safety as fast as his two hundred and twenty pounds would let him go. And the first mate was well ahead of his chief.

Long Jim looked at Dennis, respect and awe in his troubled face.

"My God, boy! What have you done?"

"I didn't kill him, if that's what's worrying you.—One in each leg.—Come on, Jim. I've got to give myself up before Little sets the law on me."

"To the sheriff?" Long Jim asked.

"No. To the men who are going to be the law in this town from to-day."

Dennis gave instructions to one of the men who had appeared from nowhere at the beginning of the row.

"Get a doctor and have him look after that man."

"Yes, sir. I'll do that."

Dennis took the names and addresses of all those who had seen any part of the affray.

"They were trying to shanghai me," he explained. "I'll probably need your evidence."

This done, he walked with Long Jim to a frame building at the corner of Bush and Sansome Streets.

CHAPTER XV.

"WE'RE HERE TO HANG SOMEBODY."

"IMPORTANT business with Mr. Brannan," Dennis said to the clerk.

To Brannan, three minutes later, he opened with a remark that brought the older man to sharp attention.

"First case for the Committee of Safety, sir."

"What do you mean?" demanded Brannan.

"I've had to shoot a man—second mate of the Mary Bligh. He's not dead, but I let him have it in both legs."

"What for?" Brannan wanted to know sharply.

"There's a man in the outer office can tell you the story, sir. May I bring him in?"

"Yes."

Long Jim made an awkward bow in the direction of Brannan, when Dennis introduced him as the boatswain of the brig Mary Bligh. He hitched up his trousers and told his story.

Brannan passed verdict, one subject to revision.

"Can't see you were to blame, Gifford, but I will say you are the damnedest fool for getting into trouble!—Don't you ever take a day off and live like an ordinary peaceable citizen?"

"Every day," Dennis replied cheerfully. "It's the other fellows who get on the warpath. They pick on me because I'm so inoffensive."

"Then all I've got to say is that they're bigger fools than you are!" Brannan turned to Long Jim. "Can you be here to-morrow night at nine o'clock, and bring with you any other

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witnesses to what took place on the wharf? I want you to fetch anybody you know who can testify to the original kidnaping of Gifford. You say half a dozen of the sailors of the Mary Bligh can swear that the boy was knocked out and taken aboard still unconscious? Then get as many of them to come as you can.—And don't do any outside talking."

The boatswain rubbed his lank, bristly chin doubtfully.

"I can get one or two of 'em, if I'm lucky. Most of 'em won't want to mix in it. Beggin' your pardon, sir, but they'd be too leery."

"Of what?" Brannan asked.

"Of Duff Conway, first off—and a damn sight more of the big man back of him."

"Meaning?"

"You know who I mean, sir. No need to name him—the one who runs this town."

"There's no such person!" Brannan snapped. "I know the man you mean, and you're vastly exaggerating his power."

"Maybe so," the sailor conceded. "All I know is the talk along the water front, sir."

"Merely gossip!"

"If any of the lads came, they wouldn't dare sign on a Shanks ship again. It would be as much as their lives are worth," Long Jim explained.

Dennis nodded agreement. "They'd be hazed and knocked about a lot, if the rest of Shanks's ships are officered like the Mary Bligh," he said.

"Plenty of other ships are shorthanded, since so many seamen have gone to the gold fields." Brannan passed to consideration of another angle of the matter. "Go to my house, Gifford. I'll give you the address. Stay there until you see me. You may consider yourself under arrest. Don't on any account appear on the streets. D'you understand?"

"I'll do exactly as you say," Dennis promised.

HE kept his word. While young Gifford lay concealed from the officers of the law, who had warrants for his arrest, a few stern, determined men took action that was to result in the redemption of San Francisco from the rule of thugs, scoundrels, and unscrupulous politicians.

A dozen citizens met in Brannan's office and formed the nucleus of an organization to be known as the Committee of Vigilance. A constitution and by-laws were adopted. It was decided that an executive committee should be the active force, and of this Samuel Brannan was chosen as first president. In coöperation with it, a much larger general committee was to function.

As the symbol of the people's movement an open eye was selected, a warning to wrongdoers that the Vigilantes never slept. The signal for calling together citizens, when an emergency occurred, was to be given on one of the fire company's bells; three taps, an interlude, three more taps, another pause, then the tolling to be continued for several minutes. But no man in the group guessed that within twenty-four hours the fateful bell was to sound.

The executive committee met in Brannan's office the evening after organization. Certain important details were discussed, then those present listened to the evidence for and against Gifford.

Although Dennis felt sure that the charge against him was only a formal one that would not be sustained, he looked round upon the grave, silent

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men watching him as he entered under guard, and was awed by the atmosphere. If he had been a criminal he could not have faced them without fear. He was relieved to see not only Long Jim and two sailors from the Mary Bligh, but two of the men who had been on the wharf when he shot Duff Conway. Among the judges were Ryckman, Frank and George Ward, William A. Howard, and William T. Coleman, who a few years later was to be the leader of the city's second Vigilance Committee.

Brennan presided. Dennis told his story. Every detail of it was backed by the evidence of the witnesses. Frank Ward told what he knew of the young man's character and antecedents. Without a dissenting vote, the prisoner was acquitted. Indirectly, though not in official language, he was commended.

"If that is all the business to come before the Committee to-night—"

Brannan had got so far when there came the sound of many footsteps tramping up the stairs and a knock on the door.

Already news of the existence of a people's tribunal had spread. One of the newspapers had even carried a story about it. A dozen citizens were dragging before it a thief caught in the act.

The Committee decided to hear the case at once, but the room was so crowded that an adjournment was taken to the engine house of the California Fire Company, at the corner of Market and Bush.

Dennis was named as one of the guards of the prisoner. As they passed through the streets he learned the story of the crime. The arrested man, John Jenkins, had broken into a shipping office, had carried a small safe to the end of the pier and put it in a boat. Almost at once the theft had been detected. Half a dozen boats had pushed off after his and overhauled him before he reached the island for which he was making. He had tossed the safe overboard. At the point of a dozen revolvers he had surrendered.

Jenkins was a tall, strong fellow, dressed in clothes of English cut. He had a sinister look, and his restless eyes were bold and derisive.

AT the trial in the engine room it developed that many knew him. He was a convict from Australia, a murderer, a hardened criminal implicated in many outrageous robberies and hold-ups. As the evidence piled up against him, it became clear to those present that this was a test case. The Committee could not commit the man to prison, for he would promptly be released by due process of law. To banish him would be ineffective, since he would return as had the regulators, banished some months earlier. Only by drastic action would the evil element be intimidated.

The robber jeered at his judges. He knew that when he got into the hands of the law he would be safe. Once he told Brannan to go ahead and enjoy himself as long as he could. No man in the room seemed cooler or less disturbed than this shifty Englishman of fine physique and steady nerves.

Outside the building a great crowd had gathered. Its noise beat into the room where the trial was being held. The Committee had posted an armed guard of a hundred men, but it was well known that the criminal element or the law might make an attempt to rescue the prisoner.

William A. Howard rose, laid his revolver on the table, looked coolly

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over the assembled men, and said slowly and clearly: "Gentlemen, as I understand it, we are here to hang somebody."

That one crisp sentence was enough. It sealed the fate of the prisoner.

Jenkins did not turn a hair. He said "Bosh!" contemptuously, asked for a cigar, and smoked it nonchalantly.

The roar of voices outside had become deafening. More than seven thousand people, the newspapers later estimated, were crowded in the street. Coleman suggested that Brannan had better go out and talk to the crowd. And instantly the president of the Committee jumped to his feet.

"I'll do it," he said.

Brannan walked out upon a small balcony and raised a hand to ask for silence. The shouting died away. No speaker could have been found who was better suited to this rôle than Brannan. He had a strong voice; he was rough, profane, abusive, and hearty. He stormed at the people for their supineness; at the courts and the public officials for their corruption; at the politicians for encouraging crime.

"HOW long do you expect to let bullies knock you out with slungshots, gouge you with knives, and shoot you down with pistols?" he roared. "Every hour of the day some crime is committed. At night robbers and firebugs roam the city. No honest man is safe. Last month a shipload of convicts from Australia—some of 'em still with shaven heads—was unloaded at one of our wharfs. We welcome this scum of England's slums and lump them off with decent, self-respecting Englishmen and thrifty Scotch and brawny Irishmen who come to help build up our great California. Shame on us!

"But the hour has struck at last. A people's tribunal has been formed, and to-night we're going to hang one of these ruffians who have lately terrorized the city. Take warning, all you criminals who are sifted in among the honest men here. Your day is done. From to-night the rule is in the hands of the people of San Francisco—not in the rotten courts. We're going to clean up this city and do it right.—All of you who favor a Committee of Vigilance to restore order to our streets and justice to our courts and fair play in our government lift up you heads and yell 'Aye!'"

The roar that was lifted could have been heard a mile.

"By Heaven, there's some hope for you yet!"

Jenkins was a hardy ruffian. He walked with firm tread, head up, to the place of execution. An attempt to get out of him a confession of his crimes, implicating others, he waved aside scornfully.

"You've got me. That'll have to be enough for to-night. Let's get this business done with, gentlemen."

To the railing of the south porch of the old adobe custom house a pulley had been attached.

The loop at the end of a rope was dropped over the head of the condemned man and tightened.

From the outskirts of the crowd came cries of execration, protests against the action of the Vigilance Committee. But no attention was paid to these.

"Every lover of liberty and good order lay hold," Brannan cried.

A score of hands seized the rope and pulled. Thousands of citizens, awestruck by the thing that was being done, watched in silence the dangling body.

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The bell of the Monumental Fire Company began to toll.

CHAPTER XVI.

ON SECRET SERVICE.

THE drastic action of the Committee of Vigilance precipitated stormy protests from the opposition. Governor McDougal issued a proclamation urging that every true citizen must hold the constitution and laws of his country inviolably sacred, and must scrupulously respect the forms of legal procedure whereby life, liberty, or property is to be affected.

Supported by Broderick, a coroner's jury brought in a verdict against Brannan, Ryckman, and others of the Committee. The answer of the Vigilantes was to publish a statement signed by one hundred and eighty of the most prominent citizens of San Francisco, admitting that they were as much involved as the ones who were named.

Since most of the newspapers supported the movement of the Vigilantes, handbills got out by the Law and Order party, as the faction against the Committee called itself, were distributed through the streets of the town. One of these handbills protested:

> At any time good citizens may be seized on a dark night, hurried to a lonely spot in Happy Valley and murdered by the Stranglers . . .

Another, signed "Many Citizens," referred to the case of Dennis Gifford:

> The pets of the Stranglers are safe. A young ruffian, fresh from crime, with the blood of an honest seaman still wet on his hands, is acquitted by this self-constituted tribunal.—But a man who takes a cash box is blotted out of existence.

The Committee was not intimidated by the outcry against it. Money was needed to investigate the records of criminals, and this was pledged by thousands of residents. Secret service men were sent to Sacramento, Santa Barbara, Los Angeles, and various mining camps to gather evidence, and when this was obtained the Vigilantes acted. Criminals were publicly whipped. If the rogue was a minor one, he might be served with a notice to leave the city within five days. Many were seized, put on shipboard, and sent back to the country from which they had come, the expenses of transportation being paid out of the organization funds, if necessary.

Several of the ruffians whose names were known to be on the list of the Committee lost no time in vanishing from town. Among these was Bruce Marshall. His murder of John Brewer had been so flagrant that he felt sure he would be one of the first called to account. Until the energy of the Vigilantes had spent itself, he deemed it wise to disappear. The rumor was that he had gone south.

In defiance of the Vigilantes, outlaws continued to rob, kill, and set fire to the city. A reward of five thousand dollars was offered for the arrest and conviction of incendiaries.

Clearly the outlaws were not yet sufficiently awed. And so far, none of the higher-ups wanted by the Committee had been reached. If these well-to-do citizens were involved in obvious lawbreaking, they had covered their tracks so well that it was difficult to trace a connection.

BRANNAN sent for Dennis.

"I have a job for you," he said. "You are acquainted with the Monterey country, and you know Ramon Martinez. A man named Whit-

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taker, wanted by the Committee, went south last week. We want to make an example of him, for he's one of the leaders of these convicts. The man was transported from England to Sydney in 1836. We find that out there he had great influence with the other lags who were sent out for their country's good. Now we have reason to believe he is around Monterey—or at least that he was. We're making you out a commission to go down south, find him, and bring him back. Can you do it?"

"I can try. What does he look like?"

"Medium size—well built—broad-shouldered. Blue eyes, keen and sharp. Pleasant smile—excellent manners. He weighs about one hundred and sixty pounds. Dresses well, in an English-cut suit of clothes. Trousers of corduroy. Top boots usually well polished. Handsome face, with hair iron gray at the temples. He looks to be about forty—maybe a little more. There's a good deal of the gentleman about him, but don't let that fool you. He's a desperate character, and if it became necessary to escape, he'd shoot you down as he would a coyote."

"He'll be passing under another name, of course?"

"Yes. It may take you some time to find him. If you get him under a month, I'd say you were lucky. I'm giving you letters to the sheriffs at Monterey and Santa Barbara. Call on them for help, if you need any. Here's money for your expenses. You're to go first to Monterey."

Dennis's eyes were dancing with excited delight. He was going back to Monterey; he would see Rosita again. Perhaps her father would even invite him to stay at his house. What luck—what golden luck!

"I'll be on board," he promised, fervently.

"I'm not sure that I ought to send you," Brannan continued. "But I want some one who won't be suspected—some one who looks inoffensive and who can make inquiries without being suspected. This Whittaker is a slippery bird. We've trailed him, but lost him every time.

"Boy, whatever you do, don't make any mistakes. If this Sydney cove suspects you, I wouldn't give a pinch of snuff for your life."

"I won't throw down on myself," Dennis promised with a grin.

"WE'VE talked this over among ourselves," Brannan went on. "You're only a boy; we realize that. But you have a level head on your shoulders. We think it well to get you out of San Francisco for a time, too. You're none too safe here.—But if you don't want to undertake this job, say so. There's no obligation on you."

"I wouldn't miss it if you offered me a bonanza claim for it!—I'll do the best I can."

"We've made arrangements with Captain Brown of the Hope Allen. She sails at noon, to-morrow. You're to go aboard late to-night, dressed as a Mexican vaquero. We'll arrange to have your own clothes delivered on the ship, some time before she sails."

"Is all that secrecy necessary?" Dennis asked. "I'm not a very important person. Not many people care where I go or when."

"All our friends are being watched, nowadays," Brannan replied. "We don't want word sent to Monterey to look out for you. The fact is, the Vigilance Committee is riding none too firm in the saddle, just now. We have

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kept our seats only because of the swiftness and secrecy of our moves. Our enemies don't know where to attack us. But the least carelessness might upset us.— And the point, boy, is that we can't protect you at Monterey. You'll have to play your own hand."

CHAPTER XVII.

DENNIS LEARNS HE IS IN BONANZA.

DENNIS was still boy enough to get excited at masquerading as a *vaquero*. The costume provided him by Brannan fitted his slender body as a glove does a hand. As he looked at himself in a glass, Dennis wished the outfit were a little gayer, but he knew that the purpose of it was not to attract attention to him, but the reverse. Juan Castro would never have worn colors so somber, though one of the sons of Ramon Martinez might have done so while at work.

The blue pantaloons were open at the bottom, on the outside of the legs. Above this was a round jacket, braided with silver, but a bit dingy from use. The long sash, tied with the ends falling over the hip, was actually faded. Dennis decided to buy a new one to wear on special occasions. A black serape without ornament served for a cloak. A wide-rimmed sombrero set at a rakish tilt was a redeeming feature. Young Gifford liked himself in it.

He stained his face and hands to an olive shade. While he waited for night, he put himself through his paces as a Spanish linguist, though he had no intention of trying to deceive any native. If necessary he would have to play deaf and dumb. Meanwhile, he entered into the part so thoroughly that he felt it imperative to jabber all the phrases he knew.

When he left the house to go down to the waterfront, he was singing softly to himself:

"Adios, adios, para siempre—adios."

So secure did he feel that he sauntered down the main streets, instead of taking a roundabout way to the wharf. Nobody in the world, he felt sure, would take him for anything but a *vaquero* on a holiday.

In front of the Bella Union he stopped with an exclamation of surprise. A young man, one with whom he had flown kites and played leap frog as a boy, was walking into the gambling house. His name was Frank Peebles. The two had come across the plains together, and become partners in the same claims of Whiskey Bar. Since returning to San Francisco, Dennis had made a flying trip to the Bar, but he had learned that Bronson and Peebles had sold out and vanished.

Dennis followed Peebles into the Bella Union. He maneuvered to a position close to his friend, who had stopped to watch a keno game.

Into Peebles's ear the young *vaquero* dropped a sentence of rapid Spanish; but the miner did not know how defective its grammar was. All he caught was the word *embarcadero*. Probably the Californian wanted to know in what direction lay the wharfs. He glanced at the young fellow, led him to the door, and pointed down the street.

"*Gracias, señor,*" murmured Dennis, then drawled in English, "What do you hear from the family in Baltimore, Frank?"

Peebles stared at him long enough to have counted ten. "Good Lord it's Dennis!" he cried.

"Not quite so loud, Frank," warned

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Gifford. "Let's move out of this crowd and get alone before we talk."

THEY passed out of the business district.

"You were shanghaied, weren't you?" Peebles asked. "That's the story Jim and I heard."

"Yes—on board the Mary Bligh—and held a prisoner there for months. I escaped at Monterey and came back. Couldn't find any trace of you or Jim. They told me at Whiskey Bar you'd sold out and gone."

"True enough.— I've good news for you, Denny. We cleaned up about twenty thousand at the Bar, counting the sale price. We're at Red Dog now—got in among the early ones. Our claims are rich. Already, we've taken out a small fortune, and we think we haven't done more than skin it yet."

"Good!" Dennis told him. "You and Jim deserve it, if any one ever did. I'm more glad than I can tell you! Hope you clean up a million each."

"Don't forget that you're in on it, Denny. We were partners in the first claims; we sold them to buy this. That makes you still a partner."

"After you and Jim have done all the work?—That would be great for me, wouldn't it? If you want to give me my share of the twenty thousand, that would be fair, though."

"Why would it, when we took your money and invested it in Red Dog claims?— No, sir, it's share and share alike! Jim and I have agreed on that."

"I haven't," Dennis differed. "I know how hard it is to work a bench claim. You boys can't do all the sweating and give me the gravy. Even now, I can't join you—not for a month or two. I'm leaving town. I can't tell you why. But if you want to give me a share—say a fifth or even a tenth—I'll come as soon as I can and say 'Thank you' to the best chums ever a man had."

"We'll say a fifth, then, Denny," his friend decided.

Peebles was a big, raw-boned young fellow with deep blue eyes and the friendliest of smiles. He hesitated on the edge of a question, then plumped it out.

"You're pretty mysterious, young chap, my lad. Are you in trouble? Is this something Jim and I can help you settle? Do you need money? If you do, we can let you have it."

"I'm in no trouble, and I don't need money." Dennis felt that he was ungenerous not to tell his friend more. "This is strictly confidential, Frank. I'm tied up with the Vigilantes, and I've been given a job to do. How long it will take me I don't know."

The big miner beamed on him. "Gosh! Let me help you with it, if there's any way I can. I've been hearing about these jobs for the Stranglers—and I'm tired of working a long tom. Give a fellow a bite of your apple!"

"I'll let you know, if I need you. That's a promise, Frank." Dennis added a caution, "We don't call ourselves Stranglers; the other fellows do that."

"I know. The word sorta slipped out. You're doing a good job, and I'm with you every foot of the way. Let's make this an honest man's country!"

THE friends walked down toward the waterfront together. On the way, Peebles told about their claims on Red Dog. They were dry placers and hard to work, but they had struck rich dirt almost at the grass roots. He mentioned a sum already deposited in a San Francisco bank that

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made Dennis's eyes open wide. They were rich men—or at least were on the way to becoming so. The amount already saved would have seemed a fortune to them, some months earlier. But in the atmosphere of San Francisco, where vast sums were made and lost so casually, dollars had come to be regarded almost as poker chips.

In the darkness near the wharf where the Hope Allen was tied, the two young men parted. Dennis asked a sailor lounging on the pier if Captain Brown was on board yet. He spoke in broken English.

The sailor took a dirty clay pipe out of his mouth. "He is that, me boy. Would you be the new cook?"

"I'm a—what you call—passenger, *señor.*"

"The hell you are!" The sailor looked the Mexican lad over frankly. "Have ye paid for your passage?"

"*Si, señor.*"

The sailor jerked a thumb over his shoulder. "The old man's aboard, if you want to see him."

Dennis knocked on the door of Captain Brown's cabin and opened it after a gruff "Come in!" invited him.

The master of the ship stared at the young Mexican.

"And what the devil do *you* want?" he asked.

The captain's visitor answered with a pour of liquid Spanish vowels.

The master threw up a protesting hand. "If you know any English, my lad, heave to and start again."

"I know a little, captain," Dennis said with a grin.

Brown jumped to his feet and clapped him on the back. "If it isn't my little cock-of-the-walk, Dennis Gifford. Lad, you should be an actor!"

"I'm travelling incog," the young man explained. "Perhaps you know what I'm going south to do—or to try to do."

"Not I—except that you're going for the Vigilantes. That's enough for me. I don't need to know any more."

"We don't want word spread around that I'm out of San Francisco."

"I'm a clam!" Brown promised. "How would you like a noggin of rum to keep the cold out?"

CHAPTER XVIII.

AT CUTTHROAT DAVE'S.

DENNIS had not been in Monterey five minutes before he met Rosita Martinez and her brother Guillermo. They were riding down Alvarado Street. The girl's slender erect figure, so supple and so undulant, looked as though it had been fashioned for the saddle. She had ridden ever since she was three years old, and a good seat was second nature to her.

Her dark eyes swept casually past Dennis, then returned to his face, drawn perhaps by some subtle magnetism. Abruptly she pulled up her horse. Dennis saw her lips open to call his name, but the words died before they were uttered. Not knowing who was within hearing, he shook his head in swift warning. Men were lounging in the doorway of a *tendejon,* and others were passing along the street.

Gifford swept off his sombrero in a bow, and moved toward the riders. In his bad Spanish he spoke to Guillermo.

"*Señor,* I am Jesus Pesquiera, with a message for Don Ramon Martinez. Can you tell me if he is at home?"

Guillermo frowned at him. This did not ring true. No Californian ever spoke such Spanish as that.

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Rosita replied for her brother. She spoke in Spanish.

"He is at home. If you go there now, I am sure you will find him."

Guillermo's surprise was deflected toward his sister. It was not customary for women of his race and class to take the word from the males of their families, in addressing strange men.

A blush ran beneath the olive of Rosita's cheeks.

"He is the American sailor, Mr. Gifford," she murmured. "He does not want to be recognized. I do not know why."

As Guillermo looked at Dennis, his white teeth flashed in a smile.

"It is true, Rosita! And I did not know him." In a louder voice, he added, "My father will be glad to see you, Jesus. He has been looking for a message from Santiago. Are the cattle in the hills still fat?"

"They are very fat. The grass is good, *señor.*"

No more was said. The riders went on their way, the *vaquero* on his. But Guillermo and Rosita changed their plans all at once. They decided that it would be well to prepare their father for Gifford's arrival. Otherwise, in his surprise he might betray the young man to some servant.

They turned off Alvarado Street, crossed to Van Buren, and rode at a canter for home.

WHEN Dennis reached there a few minutes later, Ramon Martinez came forward to greet him with a smile.

"Ah, Jesus! I have been looking for you. Is all well at the Rancho Carmelo?"

He led the young man to the room which he used as a library and office. The door closed, he pronounced the hospitable words of greeting which were so natural to him.

"I am glad to see you, *amigo mio!* My house is yours. I hope that God has been good to you."

"Beyond my deserts, *señor.* I have found my partners. They tell me we have bonanza claims.— And you? All is well with you? That villain Castro has not annoyed you?"

Martinez shrugged. "He has annoyed me, yes. Fifty of my fat cattle have been run off—by Castro, very likely. *Quien sabe?* One of my *vaqueros,* a good boy, was killed by the thieves. The cows I could spare, but for the mother of the boy my heart bleeds!"

The Californian did not ask the young man why he had returned, though he knew there must be some important reason. A courteous host did not concern himself with the plans of a guest. If the latter desired to make a confidence, well and good.

Presently Dennis opened his mind. He told all that had occurred in San Francisco during his stay.

"You have come south, then, to find this man Whittaker and to take him back with you?" Martinez asked.

"Yes."

The *caballero* thought for a moment.

"It would be well, while you are here, to stay concealed in my house. I will make inquiries. If this man is here—in Monterey—be sure I shall find it out."

"Neither he nor his friends must learn that we are making inquiries about him," Dennis explained. "He will be most wary, since he knows that he is wanted. A suspicion—and he would be off."

"You do not know who his friends are?"

"No. But I have thought that

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through Shanks he might try to make contact with Juan Castro. That is just a guess."

"Castro has not been here since you left. Of that I am pretty sure. Our officers are on the lookout for him. To-day, I shall find out if there are any strangers in town who might be Whittaker."

THAT evening, Don Ramon signaled the guest to join him and Rosita's brother, Antonio.

"Antonio reports that there are two strangers in town. They are at a low drinking dive known as Cutthroat Dave's. The owner calls his place The Seamen's Rest. It is behind the custom house. One of the strangers is dressed well, in a broadcloth suit and a high silk hat. The other is a rough sailor, unshaven and dirty."

"I'd like to see those two strangers," Dennis said. "I think I'll slip down to this dive and have a look at them."

"Not very safe," Martinez demurred. "If some one should speak to you in our language?"

"I would point to my mouth, to let them know that I am deaf and dumb."

Ramon shook his head dubiously; but he could not move the young man in his resolution to go and to go alone.

"If you are going to Cutthroat Dave's you'd better look more like a ruffian," Antonio suggested. "Guillermo and I will help you dress the part."

When Dennis looked at himself in the glass, after he had been made up for the occasion, he had to admit that he had the appearance of a dirty and ragged ne'er-do-well.

Fifteen minutes later, a young Mexican slouched into The Seamen's Rest. He went to the bar and put some gold dust in a sack upon the counter, then pointed to a bottle and to his throat. The bartender flung a stream of rapid Spanish at him. He shook his head, touched his ears and then his tongue.

"He means he's deaf and dumb," explained Cutthroat Dave. "Give him what he wants."

The peon lounged at one end of the bar. In the room, not counting the bartender and the proprietor of the dive, there were only two other men besides Dennis. The young man apparently paid no attention to them, though his gaze wandered over them casually. One was a sailor, rough and unshaven, the other immaculately clad in the manner Antonio had described. Both men were looking closely at Dennis, and he felt a pulse of excitement beating in his throat. For the well-dressed one was Bruce Marshall.

Dennis rolled a cigarette and lit it.

"What's your name, fellow?" demanded Marshall, harshly.

Dennis paid not the least notice to Marshall's question.

"He can't hear you," the sailor said. "He's deaf and dumb."

Dennis was listening intently. The sailor spoke in an English voice.

"So he claims. But I like to be sure.— You know him, Dave?"

Cutthroat shook his head. "Me? No. I don't know half of those who come in here."

He moved to the young man's side and shouted in his ear.

Dennis merely shook his head.

"He's deaf, all right," Cutthroat said.

"Let him stay," the sailor said. "He's doing no harm."

The door opened, and Felipe Pacheco, one of Joaquin Murietta's bandits walked into the *tendejon.*

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK.

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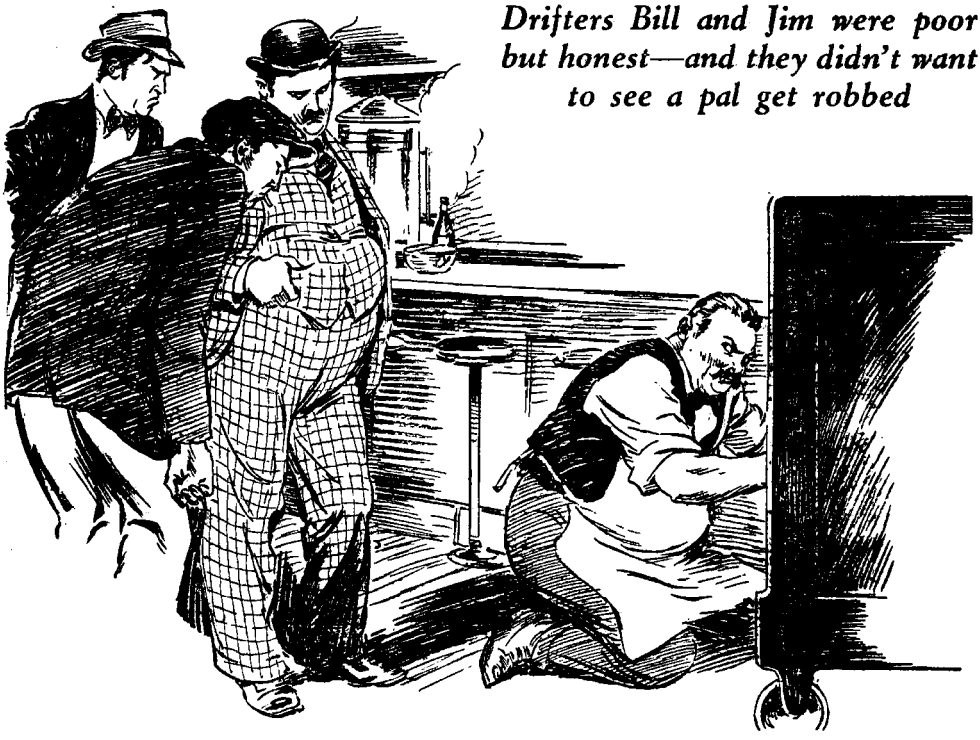
Fixing "Fingy"

By JOHN H. THOMPSON

Drifters Bill and Jim were poor but honest—and they didn't want to see a pal get robbed



Before they could stop him, Gus explained the working of the safe

BILL tried to give Gus the high sign but Gus was so proud of his new lunch room that he had to display everything including the busted safe in which he kept his money and the bronze medal which he had won in a marathon dance in those hectic days when marathon dances were considered nourishing food for suckers. Gus naturally assumed that anybody in company with Bill and me must be on the level but the only reason "Fingy" McFadden happened to be with us was that he had buttonholed us on the street and invited us to join him in a cup of coffee—at our expense.

If we had spotted Fingy first he wouldn't have been with us at all, because we knew him too well to yearn for his company. He is one of those birds who would just as soon slug a man on the head to rob him if he couldn't pick his pockets. Fingy belonged in jail and to the credit of the commonwealth it must be said that he usually was there. The blindfolded dame who juggles pharmacist's scales in the ornamental designs over the entrances to court houses peeks out from under the blindfold occasionally to shoot a thimbleful of grease into the gears that turn the wheels of justice.

We didn't want an honest old carnival pal like Gus to be showing a guy like Fingy his safe, especially if the combination was busted, but Gus never

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tumbled. He spilled the whole works including an explanation of the trick for opening the broken safe. Fingy seemed deeply interested—altogether too dog-goned interested. We warned Gus that he shouldn't keep his valuables in the safe but he scoffed at the suggestion.

Fingy interposed the opinion that if the lock on the rear window was O. K., it was all right to keep money in the safe. He studied the layout of the back alley leading into a side street, examined the window lock, tried it two or three times, raised the window up and down and then pronounced judgment that Gus could stow buckets of gold in the safe and it would be as secure as though it were in the vaults of the sub-treasury.

If Gus had known Fingy as well as we did, he'd have tossed the safe into the back alley, put the money in his pocket, and kept the counter between himself and Fingy.

The only encouraging thing was that Gus apparently didn't have much money. He had been trying to float a loan of $100 to tide him over until the first of the month, when a factory employing hundreds of potential pie-eaters was going to begin operation next door, but the guy who was thinking of coming across with the $100 was still a bit skittish, Gus confided to us.

Bill and I planned to return to the restaurant after we parted from Fingy and give Gus a friendly warning, but Fingy gummed up this program by extending an invitation to himself to spend the night with us. He intimated that he would have to sleep in the gutter if Bill and I failed to let him horn in on our room, so, not wishing to see the gutters littered with such human trash, we let him come along with us. Furthermore, we figured that if we kept Fingy in leash for the night, a warning to Gus would not be necessary. Bill took the precaution, however, of hiding our slim roll under a corner of the rug before we turned in.

CAME the dawn and with it realization that twice during the night I had been half-awakened by a noise. I rolled over and was relieved to see Fingy's ungainly form sprawled on the couch. I figured that if he had crept out and committed a burglary during the night he wouldn't have bothered returning. Perhaps, after all, Fingy had reformed. I doubted it, though.

The doubt was strengthened when we arrived at Gus's place for breakfast. Poor old Gus was pawing over the mire in the slough of despondency. Somebody had crept up the alley during the night, pried the lock off the back window, entered the place and cleaned out the broken safe, taking the marathon medal and eighty-nine cents in cash, the previous day's profits.

Bill and I swung on Fingy, but he was nonchalantly looking over the breakfast menu.

"How about it, Fingy?" demanded Bill angrily.

"Two eggs, a slab of ham, a cup of coffee and an order of doughnuts will suit me seeing as youse guys are paying the bill," replied Fingy.

"What d'you think I'm talking about?" snapped Bill testily.

"What in thunder would a guy be talking about in a restaurant at breakfast hour?" retorted Fingy coolly. "Breakfast of course."

"Gus was robbed during the night—somebody broke into the safe and cleaned him out," said Bill.

"Well, fill me up with breakfast and I'll sweat sympathy from every pore."

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"Where were you last night?" Bill persisted.

"Haw, that's good," croaked Fingy. "I was with you two guys all night, wasn't I?"

Bill was nonplussed.

"Wasn't I?"

"Yeh—I guess so," Bill conceded finally.

"Well, shut up, then, and tell that boob friend of yours to rustle that breakfast along. I'm hungry and I never like to talk about business matters on an empty stomach—it affects my digestion."

It was an uncomfortable breakfast, however. Poor old Gus was filled with gloom and Bill and I were filled with suspicion. The depressing silence was broken only once—when Fingy asked Gus whether or not the missing Marathon medal was bold or brass.

"They claimed it was gold," sighed Gus despondently.

And Fingy seemed so gratified at this bit of information that we would have insisted upon searching him on the spot had we not realized that Fingy was too slick to have the loot in his possession. It was his proud boast that in all the times he had been sent to jail he never had been convicted except when he had been caught red-handed on a job. Anyway, we couldn't very well accuse Fingy of anything because he had us sewed up on an alibi. It would have been easy enough for him to go out during the night, but Bill and I couldn't prove it.

BREAKFAST cleaned up, Fingy pushed back his chair and announced that he was going down town to see a jeweler friend on a matter of business.

"I'm going over to police station," said Bill—"to chat with an old pal of mine," he added hurriedly as Fingy glared at him in angry suspicion.

"Don't get too chummy with any cop," growled Fingy. "And don't forget, either," he added, "that youse two guys were with me all night. So long." And he strode out of the place without even a thank-you for the breakfast.

Bill beckoned to Gus.

"Say, Gus, old man," he said, "I think we can nab the bird who broke into your place last night."

Gus looked at him in pleased surprise.

"I got a hunch the burglar will come back to-night, and there'll be a couple of cops waiting to grab him red-handed," said Bill. "But just keep that under your collar. I'll handle the situation and everything will come out O. K."

"Fine, fine," said Gus. "But the devil of it is that this business will queer my chances of getting that loan to tide me over until the factory opens up next door. The fellow with the money will find out that I had only eighty-nine cents in cash and that now I'm broke, and he won't want to take a chance. Ain't it the heck of a note—just as I got this business started in pretty good shape?" He lapsed into gloom again and Bill and I departed.

"What's the bright idea you've got now?" I demanded of Bill as soon as we were outside.

"That blasted crook, Fingy, pulled off that job in there," declared Bill.

"So far you are hitting on all six," I conceded.

"But he's coming back to-night and we're going to catch him red-handed," chuckled Bill.

"Now half your cylinders are missing fire," I said.

"Keep your eyes open and you'll see some highbrow detective work,"

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Bill boasted. "Fingy may be slick, but I know that baby from A to Z and back again, and I haven't been drifting about the country for twenty years without learning something. I tell you what to do. You go back to the room and stand guard over our two extra shirts and the valise of Indian oil. Fingy is apt to drop in and cart away anything that's left lying around loose. Better tell the landlady, too, to keep the front door locked and bolted until the menace to property is removed. I'm going to make a couple of calls. Then I'll meet you in the room."

It was along toward noon before Bill blew in, and if it wasn't for the fact that he was too busy patting himself on the back I might have pumped some information out of him.

When we went out to lunch we lugged along our extra shirts and the valise with us. It was well we did, because Fingy arrived in our absence. We found him in the room on our return, sitting with his feet on the table.

"I decided to spend another night with youse," he informed us. "I don't believe in tossing up signal rockets by skipping out of a burg right after there's been a break. 'Wait twenty-four hours and then beat it'—that's my motto. Gotta smoke?"

"No," snapped Bill.

"High-hatting me, eh? A guy with a cheapskate friend who keeps nothing but a little chunk of chicken feet in a four-foot safe ain't no kind of a guy to be high-hatting other people," sneered Fingy.

"Maybe he had more cash that he didn't want to leave handy for crooks," growled Bill. "And don't forget he had a gold medal that he won and—"

"The medal wasn't gold," grumbled Fingy. "Nothing but a cheap hunk of—" He paused abruptly and tried to change the subject.

"How do you know the medal wasn't gold?" demanded Bill.

"Aw shut up," snapped Fingy.

AFTER that, conversation languished until along toward dusk, when Bill, looking through the evening paper, announced that there was an item about the burglary.

"Let's see?" demanded Fingy. He grabbed the paper.

He read the item and then sat looking off into space, reflecting.

"That guy in the restaurant is kind of a simple-minded boob, isn't he?" he commented.

"It looks like it—from the way he showed the safe and busted lock and everything," Bill conceded.

"Huh!" Fingy lapsed into silence again and ignored hints that he pass the paper along if he was through with it.

Five minutes later he departed, taking the paper with him.

"He runs true to form, even if it's only a newspaper that's lying around loose," I remarked to Bill.

"Good riddance," chuckled Bill. "The next time we hear anything about him he'll be where he belongs—behind the bars."

"What did the item in the paper say?" I demanded curiously. "Did it mention that he was suspected or anything like that?"

"Not a word," said Bill. "It was just a brief note about the burglary. I wonder what's eating Fingy?"

His self-satisfied smirk told me that he had his suspicions.

Gus greeted us with a broad smile when we arrived for breakfast in the morning.

"They caught him — that fellow

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Fingy—at eleven o'clock last night," he informed us. "He was half way through that back window when the cop grabbed him by the neck and yanked him in. He's over in the lockup now."

"That's good news," declared Bill enthusiastically.

"And I got my medal back. He had it in his pocket," Gus continued.

"More good news," chuckled Bill.

"And there's still more," grinned Gus. "Joe Mosher—that's the fellow who was going to stake me with a loan—blew in this morning and said I could have the hundred after all. He said so long as I apparently had a little capital of my own he was willing to lend a hand. You're all right, Bill. The breakfasts this morning are on the house. You are responsible for me getting that loan and for that crook being nabbed."

"Oh, no, Gus, you got the loan yourself," Bill protested modestly. "And cupidity got Fingy."

"Say, Gus," I interposed, "is that last night's paper over there on the counter?"

Gus nodded.

"Here, Bill, show me that dog-goned item about the burglary," I directed. "So's I'll know maybe what in thunder you are jabbering about."

Bill opened up the paper and pointed out the item. It consisted of only two sentences:

> A burglar last night broke into Gus Patterson's restaurant at 190 Water Street and cleaned out the safe, but only got eighty-nine cents in cash, overlooking the regular cash box under the counter. A friend of the restaurant man told the police to-day that there was about $75 in the box.

"That's all there is to the item," I said.

"It was enough," chuckled Bill.

THE END.

Underground Salt Lake

WHAT is believed to be an underground salt lake or river has been discovered beneath a wildcat oil field near Yoder, Kansas, as the result of attempting to "plug" an unproductive oil well. It may result in the abandonment of this district if the salt area proves to be extensive.

When the drill bit broke through the shale at something over three thousand feet of depth, strong salt brine came up in the casing so rapidly that it was decided to discontinue the drilling for fear that the salt water would overflow and spread out over the surrounding farm lands. Or the brine might break into the drinking water table.

Tons of sand and straw were dropped into the hole without the slightest effect. This sort of plugging material disappeared as though it was falling into a bottomless lake or was being carried away by a strong subterranean current of salt brine. One theory in explanation is that a vast deposit of sponge-like rock salt has been dissolved by an underflow until it is now pure brine either in a deep pool or a flowing river.

The well was finally plugged by a crew of specialists in this particular work. An expanding plug was dropped into the casing and the space above filled with concrete. *David Baxter.*

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Picture Rock

By FRANK RICHARDSON PIERCE

Author of "Wooden Soldiers," "Forbidden Timber," etc.

Jerry McGrath, trapped by his Nevada mining enemy and trapped by nature, refuses to quit

"Cut off my leg, Tim," Jerry managed to say

LEADING UP TO THIS CONCLUDING INSTALLMENT

WHEN Jerry McGrath went to Hobart, Nevada, to see his dying father, he learned that the elder McGrath had been murdered by gunmen of Spider Darby, owner of the Jawbone mine and the man who practically ran Hobart. Before Snake-bite McGrath died he told Jerry of the location of the Phantom Lode, a rich gold mine he had discovered.

Recruiting a few faithful helpers, Jerry set to work developing the mine, biding his time about avenging his father's death. Spider Darby, however, did not bide his time; he began an underhand yet furious struggle to drive out Jerry and get control of the mine. He had Lois Darby, the girl he had raised as his daughter, try to get Jerry's interest to distract him from his work. When Jerry and Lois fell in love and she refused to do Darby's bidding, the mining baron broke her heart by telling her that she was only his adopted daughter, and was in reality Jerry's sister.

Next, Darby had Hallock, the crooked mine inspector, condemn Jerry's mine and order it closed. Jerry had a fist fight with Hallock and, shortly afterward Hallock was found stabbed to death. Jerry was arrested for the murder, but his friends freed him from jail and concealed him in the mine.

Among these friends were Mike Hurley, Hal Silvers, Jack Carney and blind Tim Brent. One of Jerry's followers

This story began in the Argosy for June 9.

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was a traitor, however, known to Darby as Joe Grundy, and in Darby's pay. He told Darby of Jerry's whereabouts, and Darby ordered Grundy to dynamite the mine, killing Jerry if possible.

CHAPTER XVI.

BLAST!

IN his quiet cross-cut, Jerry watched the men file past on their way to work. Flickering candles and bobbing miner's lamps lighted the way and outlined the rugged faces. Laughter echoed through the tunnels as the men exchanged rough banter. They were all there — Tim Brent walking alone, without light, for he always walked in darkness. Then the deaf Carney turning his light on moving lips to catch the jokes. Hal Silvers with his thin, hawkish features sending grotesque shadows dancing along the timbers, trailed along. Mike Hurley was in a happy mood.

"And this mornin' I says to me old woman, I says, Kitty darlin', would yez mind puttin' in an extra slab of pie for the horse, Molly and she says . . ." What Kitty Hurley said was lost as Mike trudged beyond hearing.

Silence settled over Jerry's drift. The sound of hammer against steel came faintly. Jerry wondered if his hastily organized political committee was at work, or merely going through the motions of winning an election. Suddenly he grew tense and alert.

The faint odor of a burning fuse drifted into the cross-cut. It was elusive and at first he was not certain of the odor. It grew stronger. He listened. No warning cry of, "Fire!" had sounded through the tunnel. There were no hurrying feet or dancing candles as men fled to points of safety. Jerry crawled over the obstructions and dropped into the main tunnel. He turned his miner's lamp about in an effort to locate the burning fuse. He knew of no reason why a blast should be set off in the immediate vicinity. Unless there was treachery he also was certain somebody would have shouted a warning. Joe Grundy came to his mind.

"Fire!" Jerry bellowed. "Fire!"

As he turned towards the mine mouth a sudden blast of air knocked him down and with it came a deafening crash. Jerry got to his feet and ran into the mine. Everything seemed to be falling about his head. His light was out, but he stumbled on, shielding his eyes with his arm, his body knocking into timbers and rock walls.

A second blast let go and a flying body struck him. The man grunted heavily, groaned and got to his feet. He staggered down the tunnel and passed a new cross-cut, then lurched on. Jerry followed and as he passed the cross-cut he saw a dimly lighted candle stuck in the cross-cut beams. He turned towards the light, just as the heavy timber cracked and splintered from some abnormal burden. The cross-cut was caving in.

Jerry blundered on down the tunnel and a flying timber struck his shoulders and he went down, stunned. A continuous roar filled his ears, then silence, broken frequently by isolated crashes as rocks continued to shift. Jerry tried to regain his footing, but something held his left leg between the calf and the foot. There was no pressure, but when he tried to drag his foot clear, rock held it tightly. In the inky darkness he groped about in an effort to ascertain his danger. A timber lay beside him and shattered rock beneath. He removed the rock and arranged an easier surface on which to rest, then

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tried to turn around to a sitting posture. This was impossible.

He could hear rock grinding and crumpling all around him. The slow crushing of a post sent splinters from the wood. He heard them breaking near his leg. He struck a sulphur match. It burned bluely for a moment, then flared. It required all of his courage not to cry out when he saw his position. A great rock had pinned him down. This rock was held off in part by the post. But the post was giving way, the opposite ends being pressed towards each other as a thumb and finger would press cheese. When the post broke the rock would settle. It would probably pinch off his leg. When he realized this, he remembered the trapped wolf that would not quit.

SEVERAL minutes passed before he prepared himself to endure a painful death. Sometime later a light danced in the inky darkness. Jerry shouted and Tim Brent answered. Jack Carney, carrying the light, appeared and Tim was behind him. Others came up, carrying lights. There were perhaps two dozen and Molly, the horse. They shouted their names, there in the tomb, and the walls echoed each name hollowly.

"The blast has blown up a big section of the mine," Jerry said. "If I hadn't smelled the fuse I'd have been caught in the drift and been killed. Maybe it would have been better."

"Let's have a look," Carney suggested. "Blow out the lights, except one—this air is precious." He examined the rock pinning Jerry. Tim felt about with his sensitive fingers. While they were doing this the post snapped. Rock above crashed and the men ran like rats. They fell over each other in the darkness and cried out. Only Tim Brent and Jack Carney stayed. Jerry cried out in sudden agony, then set his teeth. He could feel his teeth grind from the pressure, but it helped the pain. He remembered a miner pinned down who had asked his fellows to kill him. They all wanted to do so, but no man among them could summon the courage. It was horrible, he thought, when men could not marshal sufficient courage to be merciful. He gasped, and remembered the trapped wolf again.

"What's the prospect, Tim?" he asked.

"The rock is swinging towards you, Jerry," Tim said. He was exploring everything with his fingers and Jack Carney was telling him how it looked to him.

"Cut my leg off, Tim," Jerry managed to say. "Cut it below the knee if you can. Fix a tourniquet so I won't bleed to death."

"It looks as if we'd have to do it," Tim said.

"You think so?"

"It looks that way to me," Tim repeated. It seemed strange for a blind man to be relating how things looked.

They fastened the tourniquet and Carney turned his back and opened his knife. He stood there for several seconds and the sweat poured down his face. He kept swearing softly, like he was in distress. Then he went down the tunnel and returned, carrying a saw behind his back. Jerry's eyes caught the gleam of steel. They would have to saw through the bone, he realized. He felt sick, but he wasn't afraid.

Hal Silvers came up. His face was ashen in the candlelight. He was like something dead, given life. He rubbed his hands constantly.

"Will he die?" he whispered.

"We may all die," Tim Brent an-

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swered. "Brace up, Hal!" he urged. "Men must die . . . like men!"

Jack Carney cut the cloth around Jerry's leg, then he stopped.

"Damn it!" Jerry yelled, "finish the job! Don't wait! I'm ready!"

"There's a way," Carney muttered. "There's another way. The rock is balanced on a sort of ridge. If we could blast out that chunk on the left hand side, it might tip up the right hand side and take the weight off Jerry's leg long enough to get him free. But, the concussion might start a cave-in and kill you, Jerry. Or the blast might kill you." The sweat kept pouring down his face.

"You are the best man who ever set off a blast, Jack; go ahead. I'll take a chance." Carney watched Jerry's lips move and nodded. But he turned to Tim Brent and asked, "Is that what he said?"

Brent nodded. They got steel and began drilling. The blind man swinging the hammer. Around grouped the others, staring. The light played on the ring of faces. It was like some savage rite—something that perhaps had happened in the chamber hundreds of years ago with the rising sun of picture rock looking down.

THEY drilled two holes and loaded them. Jack Carney cut the fuses. It seemed hard to satisfy him. He kept trimming them and trimming them. One blast must go off a split second ahead of the other. The first would blow out the supporting rock on the left. The second would tilt the bowlder crushing Jerry's leg. They stuffed ore sacks around him to ease the shock of the blast. They filled his ears with cotton and told him to keep his mouth open. They covered the loaded holes with sacks to stop flying rocks and finally a rope was tied to Jerry and men at a safe distance stood ready to exert sufficient pressure to drag him clear.

Jack Carney hesitated. "We've told you your chances, Jerry—anything you want to say in case..."

"To Lois...my love!" Jerry's voice was calm.

Some miner caught his breath. A man was about to be given life, or blown apart.

"To Bradner Merritt my affection and respect. And tell Eddie Hurley to never forget the story of the wolf. All right, Jack."

Jack touched a match and the fuses hissed. He risked his own skin by walking, instead of running. That was to help Jerry think it was not very dangerous.

He did not want the imprisoned man to feel the last man near was running to safety.

It was as silent as the tomb, except for the men's breathing and the hissing fuses.

"God! I can't stand this!" a voice screamed.

"Easy, Silvers!" Tim Brent answered.

"*Crrrrump!*" The air rushed through the bore and the men on the line pulled.

"You're pulling me apart..."

Jerry's protest was silenced in the second blast. They dragged him, half conscious, to their feet and beyond, while falling rocks rendered the tunnel a hell of noise.

Carney examined Jerry's leg. It was bruised from thigh to heel and the outline of rocks was visible on the flesh. He groaned at the touch of fingers, so they placed him on ore sacks and considered measures for the general good. It would be days, perhaps a

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week or more, before rescue parties could reach them.

A faint tapping sounded on a pipe. A miner caught up a hammer and answered, then listened. The tapping was repeated.

"They know we're alive, boys," he cried, "and that's all they need to know."

"This air'll be getting bad," Hal Silvers said. "I think we'd better knock that horse in the head. She breathes as much as several men."

Despite his pain, Jerry McGrath was able to give orders.

"That horse gets the same chance as the rest of us," he informed them. "In the past she's saved more than one miner's skin. Leave her alone!"

"We've got to watch Silvers," Tim Brent whispered. "He's going to pieces. We've got some trying hours ahead of us. If a man cracks, no telling what'll happen. It's the dark and the feeling of imprisonment; the realization you can't leave. I'm used to the dark, but not the others."

FOOD and water were rationed and the horse was taken to a remote section and tied in the hope she would escape attack at the hands of some half-crazed miner.

Hurley and a considerable gang had been caught in another drift. It was impossible to tell whether any had survived. Partial relaxation was followed by logical thinking and grim conclusions.

To a man, they agreed some one had set off a heavy blast at a critical point. Here the rock, comparatively speaking, was faulted and loose. Here, too, the drifts and cross-cuts extended from the main tunnel almost like the fingers of a hand. If the cave-in, following the blast, proved progressive, the loss of life might be serious, the damage extensive.

Jack Carney kept account of time by winding his watch and religiously carving notches on a stick. For a time they were always hungry and when the last of the carefully divided food was gone there was an acute period. They suffered from hunger and the nearness of each other. Fights broke out which often developed into free-for-alls before they ended. Some men talked incessantly of rescue; others insisted there wasn't a chance; and still others brooded.

Distant blasting frequently offered hope. They knew miners were driving themselves to rescue them. But when they broke through the rescuers might take only the dead to those waiting about the mine mouth.

And this was in every man's thoughts hour after hour as they waited in the darkness.

When men reached the breaking point some one would light a candle, which burned low, so foul was the air.

"Look!" It was Hal Silvers's voice which broke a long silence. Men half asleep jerked away. "Look! How'd that deer get in here!"

"Shut up, Silvers, you're crazy!" a miner snarled. "There's no deer here."

"But I see it!" Silvers screamed. "There it is, drinking water—sweet, cool water."

"Damn you, don't mention water!" another hysterically protested. "Shut up, or I'll kill you!"

"There comes a mountain lion. It's got the deer down..."

Tim Brent's arm came across Silvers's shoulders. "Easy, Hal! Sure! We see animals. I was watching a fox a minute ago—pretty little thing," the blind man said. And such was Sil-

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vers's state of mind he did not question the blind seeing what he saw in the dark.

For forty-eight hours Tim Brent, who was always in darkness, kept the men in check. The blasts were louder now. They could hear the drills at work. Talks of rescue were constantly going on among small groups. Without warning another miner cracked.

"We're lost, boys! They're drilling right past us—driving a tunnel that'll miss us!"

He beat on the walls with his fists. "Here we are, boys. Don't go that way. God! It's black down here. And they're going by us!"

Tim Brent's arms went about him and the big miner broke down and cried. "Shut up!" a voice snarled. "Kill him, Tim, or he'll stampede us like frightened sheep. Damn it! Can't you see we're all hanging onto ourselves, Tim?"

"You bet you are, boys!" came the calm voice. "Those drills are headed this way." But in his heart Tim Brent doubted. He wanted to beat on the wall and scream, "This way! We're here!"

All night the sounds of drilling continued, for Jack Carney said it was night in the world above where there was light, freedom and life. They talked in low tones and Jack Carney said he was through with mining.

"The minute we strike gold in this mine, I pull out and live off my income."

"Amen, Jack," agreed a voice, forgetting in the darkness Jack could not read his lips.

"I'm ready to quit the game," Tim Brent added. And voices in the blackness expressed profane approval. "It's good living for us and green pastures for Molly. If we strike it, Molly will be worth thousands." He stopped speaking. "Who's muttering?"

A HUSH fell on the tomb. "Nobody's muttering! Nobody's muttering!" It was Hal Silvers's voice, low, almost mad. "You fools, can't you see? They've broken through. We're saved! Come on, boys, there's the way out!"

They heard him get to his feet and run. Then they heard his body strike the rough wall and fall backwards.

Two men lighted candles and by the dim light saw Silvers stretched out on the rocky floor.

"I can't stand it!" he screamed. "I'm going to die! We're all going to die. You'll be with me in hell! There's no getting away from you. I see your eyes in the dark and I hear your whisperings and you say, 'Hal Silvers is Joe Grundy—Darby's man!' You keep saying it." He threw himself back against the wall and his eyes gleamed in the half-light. "Well, I am Joe Grundy! You've got to know it! You've got to stop your pointing."

Tim Brent groped and found Jerry McGrath. "Got a paper and pencil, Jerry?" he whispered. "Remorse and the darkness have broken Silvers! We've got to get a confession. Another thing. Watch or the men may kill him."

"I am Joe Grundy. I killed Hallock right after the fight with McGrath. I killed him with McGrath's knife, which I slipped back into his pocket. Darby ordered me to set off the blast and kill as many of you as possible. He gave me the fuses. He said they would burn slow. I lit the first, then the second on my way out. But the first went out.

"He fixed it so it would go out. I went back to light it. I thought I had

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time, but the second went off and trapped me. Kept me in here and the first barely missed me when it let go. Don't you see! He wanted to kill me, with you, because I knew too much." He was shaking with emotion.

"Put it down," Jerry directed. "Here's paper and pencil."

Joe Grundy hesitated. He had had his outburst and something of his native caution was returning.

"Write it down, Joe." Tim Brent's resonant voice filled the tomb. "You are about to face your God for judgment. Face him with the slate clean. Write it down!"

In the foul darkness it was like a voice from Above.

Joe Grundy wrote while Jerry held the candle, and the drip, drip of tallow seemed to toll the seconds as a man marched to his doom. And when he had finished, the thud of drills seemed nearer.

"Have you told us all?" Jerry demanded. His eyes grew suspicious. "You're holding something back, Grundy! You got scared a moment ago and talked, but your revengeful streak is getting the upper hand again. Now, what're you holding back?"

"Your sister..." Grundy muttered, licking his lips. Then he set his jaw stubbornly. Jerry's fist doubled and his eyes flamed. Grundy started to rise.

Jerry's fist crashed against Grundy's jaw. "What about my sister?" he panted. "Out with it, or I'll kill you."

"Kill the coyote, Jerry!" A miner snarled a demand and others took it up. "Kill him, Jerry."

"Grundy, you were never nearer death than you are this moment," Tim Brent warned. The blind man's voice again had its effect. It quieted the threats also.

"Darby planned to adopt your sister while your father was in prison. He wasn't guilty, you know."

"Yes, I know. Go on!"

"Your sister died when she was three—never was healthy. But Darby wanted to torture your father with the thought that he, Darby, was raising the girl. So he never let it be known the little girl died. Instead he adopted Lois from an orphan place."

Jerry's fingers sunk into Grundy's arm.

"Is that the truth?" he panted.

Something in his eyes frightened Grundy. "That's the God's truth," he answered. "And now...go away!"

The miners left him there to his remorse.

"Come on, Jerry!" Carney urged. "I don't like the look in your eye."

"I won't touch Grundy," Jerry muttered. "It's Darby I want—for the suffering he caused father and Lois—Lois, crushed and almost mad!"

CHAPTER XVII.

RESCUE.

"THEY'RE bringing them out!" Word came from the mine that men had been found alive. Some leaped onto a waiting horse and galloped to Hobart. He screamed the news like a crazy man. "Some of 'em are alive! They're bringing 'em out!"

From humble cottages poured women and children. Some began running the three miles to the mine; others hastily hitched horses to rigs. Philo Todd shouted to his men to drive every available stage. Lois, thin and high strung, her dark eyes sunk deep in their sockets, heard the cry and ran to the street. She swung aboard the first stage. Mrs. Hurley and Eddie were already aboard.

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"You poor darlin'!" Kitty Hurley whispered, patting the girl's shoulder. Her own heart was all but breaking.

A crowd had already gathered about the mouth of the mine when they arrived. No woman screamed, or lost her courage. They just stood there, staring at the timbered hole in the ridge from which their men must emerge. Some lips moved in prayer, but mostly they watched, tight-lipped and dumb with shock.

An hour passed, two, then three and nothing happened, but no woman or child left. And some of them had stood there several hours each day since the blast. They were like people gathered about a grave. The first stretcher-bearers appeared and the rustle of clothing was like a great sigh.

Kitty Hurley stretched her neck, but could not see, because of the tightly packed mass in front of her. She was strong, but she would not crowd others aside. She stood on tiptoe and tried to see. Suddenly she turned to Eddie.

"Here, get up on my shoulders, Eddie, and see if—and see if—" She could not finish.

"Sure, Mom," Eddie said. "Wait'll I take off my brace—I'll be lighter then."

He removed the brace and hopped about on his strong leg. She picked him up and his eyes followed the first stretcher. It went past and a woman caught her breath convulsively and followed. She was a long-legged woman and she kept close to the hurrying stretcher men. They disappeared among the mine buildings.

"Tell me if they bring out your father," Kitty whispered. "Never mind, lad, you don't need to. I'll know by the feel of the muscles of you."

Gaunt men, shielding their eyes against the light, staggered from the mine. Grimy, strong miners, their rescuers, supported them. Women and children rushed forth to greet them and cry a little. But they thought of their sisters, waiting, and did not give completely away to joy.

From the darkness came Tim Brent, head erect, walking steadily. But they could see he had lost weight. Jack Carney reeled behind him, then a whimpering wretch came between two grim men and he was the man who had long been known as Hal Silvers. But the whisper went through the crowd it was Joe Grundy.

JERRY McGRATH, walking alone, followed Grundy. His starved face turned eagerly about when he heard a glad little cry. Lois rushed to him and neither could speak. They just put their arms around each other and she helped support his weight. It was curious, a slim girl helping a big man. He stopped the moment they were out of sight of the crowd and he looked into her eyes.

"I've learned the truth, Lois," he said. "You are to be my wife."

"I've always felt it must come out that way," she answered, "but the suspense has been terrible." They stood there clinging to each other until a doctor ordered Jerry into his cabin for examination, nourishment and rest. Lois went along and sat beside the bunk and the doctor looked at her and gave her orders about nourishment on her own account.

Kitty Hurley continued to wait without moving. "Am I heavy, Mom?" Eddie asked.

She did not answer, seeming not to know he was there. Some time later she put him down and he slipped on his brace, only to take it off again. Another cross-cut had been penetrated and they

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were bringing more men to the surface. They were weaker and some were sick from drinking the mine seepage. The last to appear walked alone.

"Mom!" Eddie cried.

"It's your worthless father, Eddie. I can tell by the feel of you," Kitty cried.

"It's Pop, and he's walking."

Mike Hurley's knees were almost buckling, but he had never been carried from a mine and he was determined not to hoodoo himself by beginning now. Mike was superstitious about such things.

He moved on to the first aid station, supported by his wife's strong arm. And, to conceal their emotions, they kept up a running fire of banter. "And all the time I sez, when I walk out of here there'll be the old woman actin' like she was worried. And sure enough there yez was with Eddie on your shoulders. It were a inspirin' sight and warmed me heart," Mike concluded.

"I never give you a thought, you blackguard," she returned. "Some of the poor lads may be hurt, I says, but that bad penny of mine will turn up as grassy as ever."

"Look!" Eddie cried. "There goes the horse doctor—taking in feed for Molly."

"And Molly gets her pasture, she does," Mike said. "The most of the cave-in came into me drift was picture rock—the lost lode's above and takes a grand dip into unfaulted rock, as all good miners knew it should do. Wait till I tell the grand news to Jerry. And, Kitty, darlin', you'll get your big house with the four bath rooms—"

"Five it was, Mike—one for guests; with pretty towels, and I'll beat the children within an inch of their life if they ever stick their nose into it," she threatened. "But it'll take so long for fruit trees to grow and the grass to turn green and thick enough for their flyin' feet."

CLUTCHING a piece of picture rock in his hand, Mike Hurley entered Jerry's cabin. He held it before Jerry's surprised eyes. "There she is, and plenty more where it came from, Jerry me lad," Hurley cried. "The fight is over!"

"Not yet, Mike," Jerry answered. "It's not won until we win the election. Hal Silvers confessed he is Joe Grundy, and his word should send Darby to the gallows, but a clever lawyer would prove Grundy insane and he wouldn't be far short of it. His testimony would be thrown out."

"And what're your orders?"

"All of us who were caught in the cave-in are to rest up until election day—then vote. In the meantime our rescue crew can catch its breath and get out that picture rock," he concluded.

"And what of the charge of robbery a-hangin' over me good woman's head?" Mike asked.

"That will be taken care of. If the election goes our way I imagine the charges will be dropped because of the failure of the complaining witness to appear," Jerry pointedly suggested. "Darby's the complaining witness. And that's enough for us now; here's the doctor again."

The doctor made his report. "Two dead, Mr. McGrath, and five pretty badly hurt. I think I can pull the latter through."

"Go the limit. Leave the funeral arrangements to me, though. Were they—married men?" Jerry put the question reluctantly.

"Single, I am happy to say," the doctor answered. "There's one more

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thing—what shall we do with this man Grundy?"

"I'll detail two men to guard him. There's no use placing him in jail. The sheriff would turn him loose. After election, when the new crowd takes office, we'll try Grundy for murder. And that reminds me—I'd better lie low. They've probably got a jail breaking charge against me."

"And that just about settles present matters," the doctor stated. He had just hung out his shingle in Hobart at Jerry's request. "At present, McGrath, I'm boss. So, away all of you and let this man rest. You too, Miss Dar—"

"Call me Lois—not that other name," the girl interrupted.

"You too, Lois. It looks to me as if you were to have a lifetime to talk things over with McGrath." And he thrust her through the door and followed, to look after others.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE SPIDER'S LAST WEB.

SPIDER DARBY sat on his veranda, rubbing his hairy arms and watching Hobart with his slightly protruding eyes. His long legs were stretched out before him. He was trying to judge the temper of the people on the streets below. His judgment must be accurate before he made his future plans.

Early in life his father had taught him the value of organization, particularly in a land where the majority of people were unorganized. He had learned that a compact group, properly commanded, could dominate large numbers indefinitely. It was merely a matter of taking care of the leaders among the unorganized as they appeared.

By this method he had bled Hobart white and fattened its graveyard. But one man had threatened him—Snakebite McGrath. He had sent McGrath, broken-hearted, to his grave. McGrath's son had picked up the threads of the battle and continued. He was building an organization, but it was comparatively weak. Darby's organization included important local officials—a sheriff who could throw men into jail on a slim pretext; a prosecuting attorney who could convict them on false testimony. The fight was far from lost in Darby's opinion. If they re-elected the old group and a new judge they could take and loot Phantom Lode by legal trickery.

But there was plenty of evidence of shrewd fighting in the opposition. Jerry McGrath had been taken from jail and beyond reach of Darby's scheming hands. Now Jerry's friends had arranged bail for him. Joe Grundy had escaped Darby's plan to blow him up when he set off the blast in Phantom Lode. Joe was a well guarded prisoner in the hands of the enemy and there was no opportunity to silence him by death or otherwise.

"It all gets back to this," Darby muttered, "we've got to win the election. Then who will prosecute Joe or listen to his evidence?"

It was then he sent for the sheriff. The sheriff appeared promptly. It was the voice from the throne speaking.

"What's the temper of the people?" Darby asked. "Are they in a sullen mood, likely to start something and maybe stretch a few necks, or are they the usual damned fools?"

"I can't figger 'em, Darby," the sheriff answered. "They ain't sayin' a word—just keepin' their traps shut."

"Here's the plan. We'll have our men at each polling place next Tues-

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day. When any of this law and order crowd shows up we'll tell 'em they've voted already. Our men will vote in their place. Understand?" Darby was thorough in such matters. If his men did not understand they were expected to ask questions.

"I understand," the sheriff answered, "but that ain't goin' to stop Jerry McGrath. He's registered and will vote at Precinct Seven. When he comes, Tim Brent and Jack Carney will be with him. The whole town will be watchin' and will be guided by their actions."

"Then that's where we'll be," Darby cried, smacking his lips with satisfaction. "We'll declare them illegally registered. If they show up, then anything we do is in defense of the sacred American ballot." He chuckled and rubbed his hairy arms gleefully. "I'm beginnin' to see how we can get a crack at McGrath. Tim Brent's blind and can't shoot. I never could figure why he packed guns. Carney's a good shot, but he can't hear. McGrath don't know the first thing about shooting. We'll beat them all to the draw because they'll have to wait for us to make the first move, and—"

"And then it'll be too late," the sheriff exclaimed. "I'll see the right people and have a good number of our men at each polling place bright and early Tuesday morning. Look, there's McGrath now, talking to Philo Todd. You don't suppose they've got a load of that picture rock ready to freight to Dripping Springs, do you?"

"Maybe," Darby answered. It was evident Jerry and Philo were well pleased with something. "They've had a crew working overtime ever since the rescue. Fifty of my men quit the Jawbone and went to work for McGrath." His face hardened. "Well, it'll be the last load McGrath sends to Dripping Springs. The next load of picture rock will go through my mill."

AND Darby's prediction was well founded. It was the last shipment of ore Jerry McGrath would make to Dripping Springs. And perhaps Jerry sensed it for he was saying, "There's thirty-six tons of ore, loaded into four wagons, Philo. Can your ten mules snake that over to Dripping Springs?"

Philo Todd tilted his battered hat onto the back of his head and Jerry grinned as he saw the hair parted on the right side as an indication of Philo's stand. Philo tugged at his mustache and squinted his eyes. He was seeing Mesquite Cañon grade. "It's the greatest load any freighter in these parts ever tackled, Jerry, but I'll do it."

"And can you get back next Tuesday in time to vote?"

"I'd like to see anybody stop me from helpin' to vote that Darby gang out of office," Philo retorted. "That comes under the head of unfinished business in this fight. Say, Jerry, did I ever tell you I took your Uncle Bradner to Dripping Springs that time he came west?"

"No, what did he say about my refusal to quit the fight?" Jerry inquired.

"He was disappointed as hell because he couldn't win you from the West, but I had a sneakin' idear he kinda admired your nerve. He wasn't a bad sort at that. Well, s'long." And Philo Todd went about his business.

Jerry walked briskly up the street to Mrs. Riley's boarding house where Lois was stopping. The injured leg was healed except for a few scars, but the recollection of the moments when Jack Carney prepared to amputate was

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vivid. Henceforth his left would be his favorite leg. We always prize that which we almost lose. Jerry was eating like a wolf and had almost regained all of the weight he lost during the period of starvation.

A half block from the boarding house Jerry caught sight of Eddie Hurley. He waved and Eddie hurried to him, shuffling and jumping as he always did when in a hurry. "We're sending sixty thousand dollars' worth of ore to Dripping Springs, Eddie," Jerry informed the youth. "Phantom Lode is going to declare a dividend and we'll have that leg and arm of yours fixed up."

Eddie's eyes sparkled. "And a house with five bathrooms for Mom? And pasture for Molly? And can Tim Brent and Jack Carney quit mining and—"

"All of those things shall happen, Eddie," Jerry assured the boy.

"And say, Jerry, as a special favor can I play the weddin' march if you and Lois get married?"

Jerry thought of the helpless fingers which moved so slowly that the notes were distinct rather than a steady flow, blending into the score. But he answered, "You sure can, Eddie. S'long and good luck!"

THE boy waved his good right arm and watched Jerry enter Mrs. Riley's boarding house. Mrs. Riley, with rare presence of mind, hurried her children from the parlor. Lois rushed into Jerry's arms. The future was sweet, when they thought only of themselves. Neither dared think of the unfinished business. There was the election. Snake-bite McGrath still slept with the unfit. Spider Darby lived and was spinning his webs.

So much had happened when Jerry and Lois were happy, they hardly dared be happy now, lest lightning strike again. "You're quiet, Lois," he said suddenly.

"I am afraid, Jerry. For the first time in my life I am afraid. There's something in the air. The people are different. Everybody acts as if fuses had been lighted and a great blast was momentarily expected. Jerry, don't take any chances, will you? I couldn't go through the agony of losing you again. I wouldn't want to live."

"I wouldn't take a chance for a million dollars," he told her in a careless tone. "I'm too selfish to risk anything now. Phantom Lode is going to declare a dividend. And . . ."

"Yes, go on!" she urged. The red was back in her full lips again. There was color in her soft cheeks. The expressive black eyes were filled with a new light.

"And we're to be married right away," he finished. "Name the day, Lois."

"Are we going anywhere?"

"You know we're going somewhere. To San Francisco or Los Angeles if you wish. Or . . . a camping trip up Silver Creek Cañon—way up to the headwaters, among the patches of snow between the broken fangs."

"That sounds so much more inviting than the city," she told him. "Will Friday be satisfactory for the wedding; Friday evening at the church?"

Any evening, anywhere, would have met with Jerry's entire approval. She promised to take over all details, except the matter of minister, best man and wedding ring.

Jerry had his own ideas about the wedding ring. He carried a chunk of picture rock to the local jeweler. "Extract the gold from this ore and make a wedding ring," he directed. "And

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let the workmanship be the greatest of your career," he added half seriously. He left the jeweler's and chanced to glance at the big house on the hill.

Darby was sitting on the veranda, spinning his web, and when he realized Jerry's eyes were upon him he laughed.

Time passed swiftly. Philo Todd arrived at Dripping Springs without the loss of a pound of ore. He accompanied the ore to the mill and watched it go through the stamps. He followed it down to the tables and watched the stream of fine gold disappear into a strong room where it was melted into bars. He watched the "quick" salvage gold that man could not see. And finally he left the mill with a check for something over sixty thousand dollars, which he deposited to the company's credit at Dripping Springs. Then Philo Todd headed for home.

He arrived the night before election day. The last speeches were being made to voters who had long since decided on their choice. Philo observed certain strangers in town—lean, hard men with tight lips and steady eyes, who did not drink and who carried their guns low.

"To-morrow men will die," Philo muttered. "Darby's bringing in a few killers." And Philo went home and cleaned his six-guns with care. Then loaded them with fresh ammunition.

DAWN brought Lois to Jerry's cabin. "Listen, Jerry," and her voice carried a determined ring, "you're not going to vote to-day. You are not even going to town. I've watched that spidery creature for three days now. He's been spinning his web. Oh, I know it's just nervousness that makes him rub his hairy forearms with his skinny fingers, but it means he is planning. He has always done it, slowly and for hours at a time, when he is scheming. And there are several killers in town. The sheriff is doing nothing about it!"

"You must understand I've got to go, Lois," he answered quietly. "I am not worried over the outcome. Tim Brent and Jack Carney are going with me. Philo Todd will probably be on hand."

"Tim Brent is bind," she cried in a worried tone. "He can't shoot."

"I've been told that he can," Jerry said. He settled the argument in his own way, with a question. "Do you want me to quit the battle after I've been through the skirmishes?" It was something of his father's philosophy. The skirmish was unimportant. Only the battle counted.

"I'm not very brave, Jerry, where you are concerned," she said in a strained little voice. "I am afraid. A man fights." She smiled. "I'll... wait."

And so they left each other smiling. And neither looked back as they separated. She galloped back to town, and presently Jerry, Jack Carney and Tim Brent followed in a buckboard. A half mile from town Philo Todd met them. He was driving an old, light stage and there was a Winchester rifle in the boot.

"It's goin' to take lead to reach a ballot box to-day, boys," he shouted. "Toughs are turning decent citizens away. Preservin' the sanctity of the ballot, they call it. Everybody's waiting to see what Jerry McGrath does in Precinct Seven."

"Jerry McGrath is going to vote," Jerry declared.

"Darby, the sheriff and a black lookin' cuss are there," Todd informed them. "They're loaded for bear."

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"I am counting on you to come with us, Philo," Jerry informed him.

"A smart commander has a scout or two out when he's in the Indian country. I'm scouting until after you boys mark your ballots," he drawled, with a jerk of his head toward the rifle. "Go on and exercise your right of franchise, as the feller says. I'll be close behind. I might have to stop and examine a horse's hoof or somethin' or other.

"If I do it'll be for a purpose, so keep right along going."

There were people on the street when they arrived, but they disappeared. The street was deserted. Hobart might have been a dead town, except for the feel of tense humanity. It was in the air. The polling place was a full block from where they hitched the horses.

Everybody understood the set-up. Darby, the sheriff and the swarthy man were on the sidewalk in front of the polling place. Their rôle was that of defenders. They knew when they were going to shoot if Jerry and his companions appeared. The latter could not know. They could not suddenly begin shooting at the Darby group without cause. The advantage was all with Darby, as usual, the watchers thought. It would all be a matter of split seconds.

A boy handed Jerry a document. He looked at it. It was a paper declaring him ineligible to vote and warning him against attempting it. He crumpled it up and thrust it into his pocket.

Tim Brent said, "Take off your boots, boys."

Carney, watching Tim's lips, nodded and removed his boots.

The watchers speculated on the reason for three men advancing bootless. Then somebody remembered that Tim's ears were sensitive and boots made a noise.

THEY began to advance at a normal pace and it was so silent one could have heard a pin drop. It was an inspiring sight, three men going to their death, as the watchers believed. Massive, white-haired Brent, with his face turned upward, like a man praying to his God; then Jerry McGrath, young, handsome and aggressive, with reckless lines about his jaw. Yet today he did not seem reckless. And last, Jack Carney, who could hear nothing, but whose vision was amazing.

Darby lifted his eyes just once, and an evil-eyed stranger, concealed behind a false front across the street, nodded. The stranger did not take his eyes off Jerry McGrath from that moment. His muscular hand gripped a six-gun, which he proposed to thrust over the top of the false front and fire at the proper time.

Darby and his two companions spread out and Darby moved from the center to the side. Jerry moved to the side, serving notice on all Darby was his adversary in anything which might take place.

"Let 'em have it!" Darby whispered savagely without taking his eyes off Jerry McGrath. "Blackie, take the blind one! Sheriff, the middle man, and I'll drop McGrath. Now!"

They went for their guns, each according to his own method. The silence was broken by a roar. There was much to see, but most eyes were on the blind man. Tim Brent's hand went for his gun *after* the swarthy Blackie had drawn. But he fired first and Blackie sagged, firing wildly in an effort to get somebody before he died. Brent did not move after his single shot, but just stood there, smoking weapon in hand,

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listening. It was as if the sound of the shots told him the progress of a battle he could not see.

Overcome by a wave of fury as he thought of his father, Jerry fired from the hip and saw dust spurt from Darby's shoulder. Darby's bullet clipped a lock of Jerry's hair and lifted his hat from his head.

Of the three, Jack Carney had been the first to fire. He beat the sheriff to the draw, though the watchers saw the sheriff's hand start first. They wondered how Carney went for his gun at the right time. Not too late, nor too soon. It was as if Darby had thundered "Let 'em have it!"

He shot once and the sheriff's partly raised gun cracked and the dirt flew up near Carney's feet. The sheriff swayed drunkenly and his face wore an expression of profound amazement. He did not seem to know just what had happened. The gun fell from his hand, but he jerked his trigger finger again and again. It was uncanny, watching the sheriff fall and jerking his trigger finger as though he were shooting. He sprawled face downward in the street and lay without moving.

All this had happened in less than three seconds. Darby's second bullet passed Jerry's second bullet and Jerry felt the wind of it. The watchers expected Jerry to miss, but they could not understand why Darby missed.

NOBODY saw a hand come over the top of the false front, a six-gun waver a moment as it searched for Jerry McGrath, then the gun drop without firing. They saw the gun strike the street and bounce. Then they looked up and there lay a man, hanging across the top of the false front. His fingers were clutching at the air and his arms and head hung downward, slowly pulling his body over. A crimson stain was crawling over his shirt, growing wider with each jerk of his body. Then with a scraping sound and a tearing of clothing his body plunged to the street. A rifle shot was still echoing through the fangs of Jawbone Ridge. And that was the margin Jerry had escaped being shot from above.

The effect on Darby was curious. He fired a third time at Jerry and dived into the polling place. As he rushed in, the election officers fled their posts. More lead would fly. Jerry flattened himself against the wall and reloaded. He was breathing hard and snarling, "I can't hit him! I can't hit him!"

Tim Brent crossed the street, guided by Jerry's voice, and caught his shoulder with the right hand and slapped his cheek with the left. "What the hell's got into you, Tim?" he demanded.

"You need a good slap to straighten you out, Jerry," Brent retorted. "You and Darby are crazy mad—that's why you're not shooting straight." Brent's big hand struck again and Jerry's head almost left his shoulders. His cheek stung from the impact. "Now get hold of yourself. Go and get him!"

A curious calmness gripped Jerry. Gun in hand, he went after the loathsome spider which had so long held a community in his web. There were more of Darby's killers in town that day, but no man among them raised his hand. To have done so, they felt, would have exposed them to a wrathful blast from an angry people. Something in the atmosphere warned them.

Jerry skulked along the wall, dashed across the street and raced to the polling place. Again he kept close to the wall. He smashed through a rear door and bounded into the room. All he saw

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was Darby's hand clutching a spurting gun. The remainder of Darby was in the street, protected by the thickness of the wall.

The hand vanished and Jerry ran through the front door into the street in time to see Darby disappear around the corner. Darby hurried around the next corner, eyes searching for an advantageous position. All doors along the street were locked and there wasn't time for him to break in. But he remembered a vacant lot, filled with rubbish. A partly wrecked wooden building stood in one corner. Snake-bite McGrath had once lived there. Sun flowers McGrath had planted still grew about the wrecked door. They were stunted from neglect, but were bright and yellow, suggesting gold.

The spot appealed to Darby. He would kill Jerry. And the shack, which had once sheltered the father, would shelter him in the end. When Jerry came around the corner he would fire. He would remain calm and this time he would kill him. Darby brushed through the tangle of sun flowers. He jerked nervously and something touched his face. It was a spider web. He brushed it from his face and squirmed into the débris. He was breathing hard and his heart was pounding madly. It pounded his ribs and the pulse leaped at his temples. His hand shook. He shifted his position and rested his arm on the window sill. The hand no longer shook. It was steady now.

HE heard Lois cry out suddenly. "Not in there, Jerry!" She was holding him. Darby could see their shadows beyond the corner of the adjoining building. "Wait until the others come! It's an ambush, Jerry!" she almost sobbed. Her shadow swung quickly, as though his arm had pushed her aside. But her shadow remained rigid and his darted ahead like a stabbing finger.

Then he came, savage in purpose, and calm. The gun in his hand was in a grip of iron. Darby fired. Jerry turned towards the sound. Darby fired again and the bullet's passage stirred the sun flowers. Jerry closed in, holding his fire, the iron hand ready to move with the swiftness of steel springs. Darby's third bullet missed. Faces were pressed against every window opening onto the vacant lot. They had seen nothing like it before—a man walking into gunfire and rendering it impotent by the cold deliberation of his attack.

Abruptly Jerry fired and they saw Darby leap convulsively, then scream with terror. His hands went into the air and he broke from shelter. His thin fingers clutched at his shoulder near the throat. There was no blood, yet he tore at his clothing, screaming in a high-piched tone that chilled the blood.

Every one seemed paralyzed. Jerry, watchful, gun ready, stood in his tracks. Lois had not moved. Her shadow resembled black paint somebody had spilled near the building.

The tearing and clawing of fingers and clothing continued. It seemed as if Darby's protruding eyes must burst from their sockets. His spidery legs stamped in a frenzy.

"I can't kill it!" he screamed. "A spider got down my neck as I went through the sun flowers. It left its web on my cheek. I can't kill it!"

Darby's face grew ashen. "One of the Phantom Lode spiders Snake-bite used in his hellish experiments was left there! Do something!" And the tearing, clawing and frenzied stamping continued.

Jerry lowered his gun and started

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towards his enemy. He was a dozen yards away when Darby suddenly fell. A shudder ran through the prone figure, then he stiffened and slowly relaxed.

The young doctor, prepared for gunshot wounds on this eventful day, turned the figure over. "He's dead," he said. "Poetic justice, I would call it. Your father experimented with spiders here, one of them escaped, and its descendant killed his enemy. That is what happened, unless the presence of the spider against Darby's flesh caused him to die of fright."

He cautiously opened Darby's clothing. And there, crushed against his hairy chest, lay a small sun flower, with slim petals spread like the legs of a spider.

"The final victory to your father, Jerry," the doctor said, getting up.

"Not the skirmish, but the battle," Jerry answered softly.

CHAPTER XIX.

RETRIBUTION.

JERRY reholstered his gun and returned to Lois. "It's all over now, but the voting," he said quietly.

"And it looks as if that has started," she returned. "People are all turning out."

The tension which had gripped Hobart for years was gone. Everywhere it was evident. Jerry voted, then returned to the mine to escape congratulations.

It was the following afternoon that several of his friends called him. "Just a little duty to perform, Jerry," Jack Carney explained. "We've done all we can without you!"

They drove to the cemetery and as they passed the unhallowed ground Jerry noticed the center grave had been disturbed. The flinty rock lay scattered about; the mound was fresh once more. There was a headstone and he caught the name "Darby" as they drove through the gate.

Hundreds had gathered around a newly made grave, dug in that section where Hobart laid its highly honored dead to rest. Again he stood by while a funeral service was read. But this time he saw only friendship in the faces of those gathered; only respect for the deceased. There was a granite stone bearing the name "McGrath" and the date of his father's birth and death.

The service ended, those gathered departed and again Jerry stood alone and watched the shadows lengthen; again the wind swept across the hills, but to-night it was softer and whispered of peace and rest.

Through the gathering shadows he walked, past the now silent Darby mill and down into Hobart. He rode to the mine and settled down to the business of writing checks. The Phantom Lode was declaring its first dividend. There was stock to be distributed among those who had remained loyal and fought the battle through. It was two in the morning before he finished the job. At eight o'clock the men were on hand.

"Two checks for you, Mike," he said when the little Irishman appeared. "One for you and a second made out to you as Molly's guardian."

"And it's meself as will take the horse from the mine the day of your weddin', Jerry lad, and turn her loose on that patch of green down there." He indicated a plot near the mine.

Then Tim Brent and Jack Carney appeared. "And listen to the amount of it, Tim," Jack cried. "Five hundred dollars and more to come. If I'm ever

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seen inside of a mine again I hope somebody shoots me."

"Amen," Tim Brent added devoutly.

IT was three hours before the wedding, and Mike Hurley tried the bathroom door for the tenth time and found it locked. "Bejabers and will yez never get out of there!"

"Thirteen of them are planning to go to the wedding, Mike," Kitty Hurley explained.

Five blocks away Jack Carney was roaring drunk. "Don't tell me I shouldn't get drunk on the night of Jerry's wedding," he roared. "That's when a man should get drunk. We're coming up there with horse fiddles and six-guns. We've found the cottage Jerry's rented for a temporary home and we've decorated it grand." He roared with laughter. "Shoes hanging all over everything and a baby carriage on top of the chimney. Eeeee *yow!*"

A familiar figure appeared. "If it ain't old Tim Brent. All dressed up in a boiled shirt!"

"Straighten yourself up, Jack," Tim sharply ordered. "We're going to Jerry's wedding."

Ten minutes later they were moving towards the church. Several miners joined them. Congratulations over the outcome of the gun fight were still in order, as were questions. "How did you know when to begin shooting, Tim?" a miner asked.

"Easy! Jack, here, just watched Darby's lips and read them when he gave the order to fire. But it was Philo Todd who saved the day. He had found out that when Snake-bite was supposed to have killed Hank Dravus, it wasn't him at all. Darby knew Snake-bite wouldn't have the heart to shoot an old fool like Hank so he stationed a man behind a false front to actually do the killing. Well, Philo guessed something like that might happen this time. Maybe a man was up there to plug Jerry in case Darby missed. And sure enough there was. Philo stopped, examined his horse's hoof as an excuse, and picked out the man. When he got ready to fire, Philo let him have it. And here's the cuss now."

Philo Todd appeared to have been freshly scrubbed. His face glistened. He shook hands all around. "Jerry's down the street; let's wait for the cuss. He's nervous as a witch cat."

They waited, like Indians in ambush, and they pounced on Jerry who was walking with Kitty Hurley and Mike.

"Hey!" Jerry yelled. "What's the matter, Philo, you've got your hair parted in the middle."

"Yep! I'm neutral again. Ain't you heard the news? Darby didn't leave a will and everything goes to Lois. She owns the mill and as between you, Jerry and her, I'm neutral. And that ain't all. She's giving the big house on the hill to you, Kitty. The green pastures will be stocked with cows so the kids can have milk."

Kitty Hurley could only stand there and blink her eyes. Presently she recovered herself. "And how many bathrooms has the place got?"

"Five," Philo cried triumphantly. "One for guests."

JERRY met Lois at the church. "Eddie's going to play the wedding march on his violin," he whispered. "If he plays too slowly or fails altogether we'll have to make the best of it."

"I know," she answered. "His poor fingers. Well, I guess that is all, Jerry. Brace up!" Her eyes danced. "You didn't forget the ring, did you?"

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"No! I've felt in my pocket sixty times to see if it's there."

They hurried to their places. The church was filled. Presently the march began. Slowly at first, then, as if the violinist seemed to forget everything and poured his soul into it, it became utterly beautiful.

"Eddie's fingers are right to-night," Jerry whispered. "If they will only stand up!" It was a prayer.

And they stood up, until Lois reached the altar. And Jerry, turning, saw Uncle Bradner Merritt with the girl. Then the service began. Perhaps momentum continued to carry him along for he neither dropped the ring, nor knocked off the bride's veil when he kissed her.

Uncle Bradner Merritt might have been second, but Tim Brent was faster. Then Jack Carney stepped up. "I'm the best damned man that ever kissed a bride," he boomed. And his kiss was explosive and slightly suggestive of rifle whiskey, but it came from the heart. Kitty Hurley cried, of course.

Jerry had dragged Bradner Merritt aside for a moment. "I'm glad you came, uncle!" he exclaimed.

"Well, I'm determined to take a Westerner back East and make something of him," Merritt answered. "I failed with you, but I think I'll win out next time. I'm taking Eddie. Going to give him the best musical education money can buy."

Eddie stepped up beaming. "Wasn't you surprised, Jerry? My fingers worked! The time you sent your uncle down to tell me not to forget the wolf in the trap, he asked me a lot of questions. Then he took me right to San Francisco. The doctor fixed me up first rate. My fingers are as good as ever and I can take the brace off in a month. We didn't tell you; we wanted to surprise you."

"You sure surprised me, Eddie."

"The trouble with me is this," Bradner Merritt said. "I've been playing with fire and it looks as if I'll burn my fingers. The West is fire, Jerry. I'm going to help you organize that chain of banks when you get back from your honeymoon. It's a sound idea. Western gold comes out of Western ground and goes into Western banks to help develop the resources."

Then Jerry was lost in the mob of well-wishers. And hours later they escaped to the little cottage Jerry had rented.

In the gray of dawn they emerged to saddle their horses, pack their outfit on two others and begin the ride up Silver Creek Cañon where they were to prepare their first breakfast.

They mounted and rode slowly towards the creek. Day began to break and a bird chorus rose from the trees as the feathered songsters offered tribute to the glory of another day. The sun rolled above the Jawbone and shadows streaked across the land. A ray struck the mouth of Phantom Lode and Jerry stopped as he saw figures moving towards it. He adjusted a pair of glasses to his eyes and a low laugh escaped him. "Just two men through with mining, now that they are rich," he said, passing the glasses to Lois.

She saw Tim Brent and Jack Carney advancing on the mine. They were dressed in their work clothes. She turned slightly and looked at a green pasture. Molly was hock deep in crisp grass. And beyond that, far beyond, where lay Mesquite Cañon grade, the sun was turning the buttes into the pillars of a temple erected to pagan gods.

THE END.

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Argonotes.

The Readers' Viewpoint

ARGOSY pays $1 for each letter printed. Send your letter to "Argonotes" Editor, ARGOSY, 280 Broadway, N. Y. C.

THE good old days—of Horatio Alger and Oliver Optic!

Fairport, N. Y.

Alas, that I have to say it, but in my humble opinion the good ship ARGOSY is headed for the rocks; some of the late stories are punk indeed.

I expect that this letter is also headed for the scrap pile, but I wanted you to know just what one of your oldest readers thought of the good old ship.

I used to read the ARGOSY when it was published like a newspaper; large pages, from four to six in each issue. Boy, those were the days, when dad came home from town with the last issue.

Some of the stories are not so bad today, but I can see a great change in the make-up and class of stories.

"The Barbarian," now running as a serial, is rotten; in fact, I do not care for Mason anyway.

The *Jimmie Cordie* stories are O. K., also some of the fantastic ones; also stories by G. F. Worts. *John Solomon* is passable, but some *Solomon* stories I do not even read.

Yours for a better ARGOSY,

CLARENCE T. WOOD.

THE best serial:

Kelso, Wash.

You boys around the office surely ought to take up a collection and buy your boss two or three cigars. For he surely rang the literary bell with Mason's "The Barbarian." I have read ARGOSY off and on for five years and "The Barbarian" is the best serial I have ever read in ARGOSY or any other magazine.

I wonder what sort of people those are that write in asking that "Men and Women of Daring" and "Stranger Than Fiction" departments be discontinued? Besides being educational they are extremely interesting and are the first thing I read in a new issue. Those that don't like them need not read them. I never read the astrology department so I won't commit myself. I like all your stories and have no kick. I have found out that if one issue is not quite up to par that the succeeding issue more than makes up for it.

Yours for more historical romances,

EARLE J. REDBURN.

EVEN teachers relax:

Fitchburg, Mass.

Just a few words to throw at some of the readers who fail to appreciate good stories. Of eleven teachers colleges in Massachusetts, we have the only men's dormitory and, being prospective teachers, read professional magazines. Some pleasure is necessary, so ARGOSY is the magazine that satisfies here, three copies having to supply sixty men.

Our favorite authors are Burroughs, Allman, Mason, and Dunn. We take turns reading the stories aloud at night so more than one man can "read" his story at a time. It is the only way to keep one fellow from hiding the magazine. We want more fantastic stories!

"THE PALMER HALL SIXTY,"
BY ARTHUR L. PARSONS.

HELP for the hero:

Chicago, Ill.

Just a few comments from another ARGOSY fan. By *fan* I mean one who takes the stories as they come, reads them all, and likes them nearly all.

"The Prophet of Death," by Allan Vaughan Elston, had a more original and interesting plot than any story I have read in a long time. It was one enjoyable bit of fiction. Let's have another one with the old savant, *Chanda Singh*, in the leading rôle.

Your "Stranger Than Fiction," "Men of Daring," and "Women of Daring" are exceedingly entertaining to me.

I agree with Mr. B. J. Kenton of Cleveland, who objects to stupid heroes, calling them "ignorant pawns in the chess-board of life." It does give one the most exasperating feeling of helplessness not to be able to jump right into the story and give the fumbling, thick-headed "hero" a helping hand, or, if thoroughly disgusted, a swift kick in the pants. This type of

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character, contrary to Mr. Kenton, I find very infrequently, else I long since would have ceased being a reader of ARGOSY.

MARC D. ROYALS.

SLIPPING?

Belmont, Mass.

As I do not expect to see this letter in print, it is going to contain a knock. Your standard, in novelettes and short stories, is slipping. Your continued stories, however, are splendid, the best to date being "Outlaws of Mars."

Of your cover illustrators, I think Robert Graef is the best. Why not have more of his painting?

Your magazine can be improved, but even as it stands it is several jumps ahead of any other on the news-stands. CHESTER J. SKINDER.

A STARTLING introduction:

Denver, Colo.

I'll bet no other ARGOSY fan got a more thrilling introduction to ARGOSY than I did! Several years ago I visited my girl friend who lives on a Colorado ranch. The first night the two of us were all alone. It must have been about 2 A.M. when we were awakened by an earsplitting crack that sounded for all the world like a shot near our bedroom window. We were so scared we didn't even dare to move! All night we lay shivering, expecting a prowler to burst in any minute and perhaps murder us in our beds.

After what seemed years, dawn finally came. Then we discovered that a wall magazine-rack, overstuffed with ARGOSYS, had crashed to the floor at the foot of our bed!

I still remember the first two ARGOSY stories I read that day. They were "The Parked Car," by Charles Francis Coe, and "Sing for Your Supper," by Fred MacIsaac.

You've printed some darn good stuff in ARGOSY lately. I wish you'd give us readers a break and let us vote on serials versus complete stories. I'd much prefer two or three longer complete stories instead of three or four unfinished ones in each issue. MINA SOERENS.

NEVER case-hardened.

Sardis, B. C., Canada.

There is such a thing as being "case-hardened" in reading stories. You read Western stories for awhile and get tired of them. The same applies to gangster, jungle, etc., stories. But with ARGOSY you'll never get "case-hardened," with the variety that the hold of the ARGOSY holds.

JACK DE PANCHER.

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Time, Chance, and a Dog

A dog's loyalty does a strange thing to its master.

By Albert Payson Terhune

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A gripping novelette of an oilfield outlaw.

By FOSTER-HARRIS

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Bellow Bill Williams and South Seas gold. A novelette.

By RALPH R. PERRY

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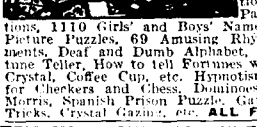

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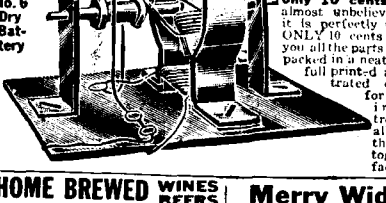

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